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The Combating Terrorism Center is an independent educational and research institution based in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy, West Point. The CTC Sentinel harnesses the Center's global network of scholars and practitioners to understand and confront contemporary threats posed by terrorism and other forms of political violence.

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The Nairobi Attack and Al-Shabab's Media Strategy

By Christopher Anzalone



Kenyan soldiers take positions outside the Westgate Mall in Nairobi on September 21, 2013. - Photo by Jeff Angote/Getty Images

AFTER CARRYING OUT a bold attack inside the upscale Westgate Mall in Nairobi in September 2013, the Somali militant group al-Shabab succeeded in recapturing the media spotlight. This was in large part due to the nature of the attack, its duration, the difficulty in resecuring the mall, the number of casualties, and al-Shabab's aggressive media campaign during and immediately after the attack.¹

From al-Shabab's perspective, the attack on Westgate Mall was a media triumph, particularly coming in the midst of a growing rift among jihadists both inside and outside Somalia regarding the consolidation of power by the group's *amir*, Ahmed "Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr"

Godane. The attack also followed a year in which al-Shabab lost control of significant amounts of territory in Somalia, most importantly major urban and economic centers such as the cities of Baidoa and Kismayo.

This article examines al-Shabab's media strategy during and immediately after the Westgate Mall attack, both via micro-blogging on Twitter through its various accounts as well as more traditional media formats such as audio statements from the group's leadership. The article also puts the group's media operations for the Westgate attack in historical context by comparing and contrasting them to al-Shabab's past media campaigns. Finally, the article concludes with an assessment of al-Shabab's current state of health and the potential for more spectacular acts of violence,

1 Roopa Gogineni, "Nairobi Mall Death Toll Expected to Rise," Voice of America, September 25, 2013.

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in large part as political and media spectacles designed to capture public attention.² It finds that al-Shabab, despite facing increased political and military setbacks, remains adept at executing audacious attacks designed to attract the maximum amount of media attention. Its media operatives are still able to skillfully exploit its enemies' mistakes on the battlefield and in the information operations war, as well as manipulating the news cycle by inserting sensationalist claims.³ It also finds that al-Shabab has maintained a great deal of continuity with its messaging toward foreign state actors active in Somalia, despite the insurgents' shifting fortunes on the ground.⁴

The Westgate Attack

Al-Shabab's complex assault on the Westgate Mall began just after noon on Saturday, September 21, 2013, when an undetermined number of gunmen entered the facility and began throwing grenades and shooting indiscriminately.⁵ Eyewitness accounts from the early stages of the attack suggested that the first response from

Kenyan security forces was, at best, disorganized, which likely was one of the reasons that the militants were able to prolong the attack over several days.⁶ After the initial failed attempts to stop them, the attackers proceeded to pick out targets from among those trapped inside the mall, in some places separating Muslims from non-Muslims.⁷ Kenyan authorities remained unsure as to developments inside the mall nearly an hour into the attack, and the first army units arrived in the late afternoon, although confusion continued due to the lack of clear command-and-control between the Kenyan military and police.⁸ The Kenyan military and police—reportedly aided by foreign advisers from the United States, United Kingdom, and Israel—helped hundreds of trapped shoppers escape the mall throughout the siege.⁹

The standoff between the al-Shabab fighters and Kenyan security forces continued through the weekend. At 1:28 p.m. Kenyan time on September 22, however, the Kenyan military's official Twitter account said that most of those trapped inside had been rescued and “most parts” of the mall complex were under control.¹⁰ The claim that the attack was nearly over was disproved in the early morning of September 23 when an explosion rocked the Westlands district of Nairobi where the Westgate Mall is located. More large explosions followed in the early afternoon. Confusion reportedly continued with regards to the exact chain-of-command among the Kenyan military and police, with differences emerging between commanders and the office of Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta.¹¹ Fighting continued into the evening of Tuesday,

September 24, and President Kenyatta only declared a formal end to the siege late in the evening on the same day.¹² The following day, shopkeepers and restaurateurs were able to return to their businesses inside the mall, where some discovered evidence of theft and looting by some Kenyan soldiers.¹³ The number

“It is suspected that al-Shabab succeeded multiple times in circumventing attempts to prevent them from micro-blogging by creating a new account each time a Twitter suspension went into effect.”

of casualties currently stands at 72, including five of the attackers and six Kenyan soldiers.¹⁴ As of October 15, the Red Cross reported that 23 people were still missing after the attack, although the Kenyan government claims all those missing have been accounted for.¹⁵

Kenyan authorities initially believed that there were 10 to 15 attackers, but have since revised their estimate to as low as four to six.¹⁶ They have named four individuals they believe participated in the attack: Abu Bara' al-Sudani (“the Sudanese”), Omar al-Nabhan, Khattab al-Kini (“the Kenyan”), and an individual named Umayr.¹⁷ All

2 For more on the “spectacle” aspect of terrorism/anti-civilian violence, see Gerard Chaliand, *Terrorism: From Popular Struggle to Media Spectacle* (London: Saqi Books, 2001); Steven Livingston, *The Terrorism Spectacle* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994). The media spectacle of violence is discussed in Douglas Kellner, “Media Propaganda and Spectacle in the War on Iraq: A Critique of U.S. Broadcasting Networks,” *Cultural Studies: Critical Methodologies* 4:3 (2004): pp. 329-338; Cynthia Carter, *Violence and the Media* (New York: Open University Press, 2003); Matthew Robert Kerbel, *If It Bleeds, It Leads: An Anatomy of Television News* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001). For a theoretical discussion of the “political spectacle,” see Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Arie S. Soesilo and Philo S. Wasburn, “Constructing a Political Spectacle: American and Indonesian Media Accounts of the ‘Crisis in the Gulf,’” *Sociological Quarterly* 35:2 (1994): pp. 367-381.

3 These include making allegations that Kenyan forces used chemical weapons during the siege and later blew up sections of the mall, burying scores of people, to hide their act.

4 Looking at al-Shabab's media operations from a historical perspective allows for a more detailed and contextualized analysis of continuities, shifts, and trends in its messaging, which is not possible if the group's statements are examined in a vacuum.

5 The Kenyan government has said that there were between 10 and 15 attackers, but the exact number remains unclear. See “Nairobi Attack: Kenya Forces Comb Westgate Site,” BBC, September 24, 2013.

6 Daniel Howden, “Terror in Nairobi: The Full Story Behind al-Shabaab's Mall Attack,” *Guardian*, October 4, 2013.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Peter Walker, “Kenyan Forces Begin ‘Major Assault’ to End Nairobi Mall Siege – as it Happened,” *Guardian*, September 23, 2013; Richard Norton-Taylor and Vikram Dodd, “Nairobi Attack: Israel Takes Lead Role in Advising Kenyan Forces,” *Guardian*, September 23, 2013; Geoffrey Mosoku, “Kenya Denies Involvement of Foreign Military,” *The Standard* [Nairobi], September 23, 2013.

10 Kenya Defense Forces, tweet, September 22, 2013, available at www.twitter.com/kdfinfo/statuses/38187765522731968.

11 Howden.

12 Ibid. Stefan Smith and Peter Martell, “Kenyan President Announces End to Mall Bloodbath,” *Agence France-Presse*, September 25, 2013.

13 Howden; Geoffrey York, “Kenyan Military Seeks Soldiers Who Looted Stores During Mall Attack,” *Globe and Mail*, October 3, 2013; Margaret Wahito, “Lenku Admits Looting at Westgate, Probe Continues,” *Capital FM Radio* [Nairobi], September 29, 2013; John Campbell, “Nairobi's Westgate Mall Attack: Unanswered Questions,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 8, 2013.

14 Gogineni; “Kenyan Mall Attack: 39 Still Missing, Says Red Cross,” *Associated Press*, September 30, 2013.

15 Ramadhan Rajab, “23 People Still Missing Almost a Month after Westgate Attack,” *The Star* [Nairobi], October 15, 2013.

16 “Kenya Military Names Westgate Mall Attack Suspects,” *BBC*, October 5, 2013.

17 Ibid. Omar al-Nabhan was the nephew of the late Saleh al-Nabhan, an al-Qa`ida operative in East Africa who served as a military trainer for al-Shabab and was

four were reportedly members of al-Hijra, al-Shabab's chief Kenyan ally, which was formerly known as the Muslim Youth Center.¹⁸ If the attack was indeed carried out largely by fighters from al-Hijra, it would be yet another sign of the increasing importance to al-Shabab of its Kenyan allies and support networks, which have steadily increased since 2010.¹⁹

Al-Shabab's Media Operations During the Siege

The start of al-Shabab's use of Twitter as a propaganda tool began on December 7, 2011, following the entrance of the Kenyan military into southern Somalia in October 2011.²⁰ Since then, it has attracted significant attention from journalists.²¹ Since its debut on Twitter, al-Shabab has made great use of the micro-blogging format to deliver its counternarrative to events occurring inside Somalia, running commentary on a host of political, social, and religious issues, and taunting its enemies, such as the African Union Mission in Somalia

(AMISOM) force inside Somalia, the Somali federal government, and the United States.²²

The insurgent group's media department provided a continuous stream of "updates" and commentary throughout the assault on Westgate Mall.²³ This reveals that the group recognizes the value of tweeting, particularly in English, in attracting the attention of the world's news media. Prior to launching their assault, the attackers may have set up a "command-and-control center" in an unidentified vehicle positioned earlier in the day on September 21.²⁴ Intelligence intercepts suggested that some of the Twitter updates posted by al-Shabab's HSM Press (Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin) account were sent from there.²⁵

The tweets posted to the account during the assault attempted to deliver al-Shabab's message in a number of different areas. First, there was the promotion of the insurgents' counternarrative, which painted the attack on Westgate Mall as a response to the greater suffering endured by those inside Somalia. Some example tweets included: "The attack at #WestgateMall is just a very tiny fraction of what Muslims in Somalia

experience at the hands of Kenyan invaders. #Wetsgate [sic]"; "What Kenyans are witnessing at #Westgate is retributive justice for crimes committed by their military, albeit largely miniscule in nature"; and "The attacks are just retribution for the lives of innocent Muslims shelled by Kenyan jets in Lower Jubba [in Somalia] and in refugee camps #Westgate."²⁶

Second, al-Shabab directed renewed warnings to the Kenyan government and public, linking the latter's security to the removal of the thousands of Kenyan military personnel from Somalia. Some example tweets included: "HSM has on numerous occasions warned the #Kenyan government that failure to remove its forces from Somalia would have severe consequences"; and "The Kenyan government, however, turned a deaf ear to our repeated warnings and continued to massacre innocent Muslims in Somalia #Westgate."²⁷ They also made a direct demand for the removal of Kenyan forces from Somalia: "The message we are sending to the Kenyan govt & Public is and has always been just one: remove all your forces from our country #Westgate."²⁸

Third, and most importantly for the use of its Twitter messaging as a propaganda tool designed to attract media attention, the HSM Press account purportedly posted "updates" on the ongoing siege at a time when conflicting reports abounded. These included tweets announcing the attack on the "Kenyan Kuffar [unbelievers] inside their own turf," denying the cessation of fighting between "the mujahidin" and the Kenyan military and police, alleging that the Kenyan government was "pleading" with the attackers inside the mall to negotiate, and reports of the calmness of the attackers despite being under siege by Kenyan security forces.²⁹ Al-Shabab also claimed via Twitter that it had "singled out" only "unbelievers" in the attack and had "escorted out" Muslims before the attack began, announcing that the defense of Muslim lands "is one

killed in a U.S. military raid in September 2009. For background information on Saleh al-Nabhan, see "Profile: Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan," BBC, September 15, 2009. 18 "Abu Baara al-Sudani, Omar Nabhan, Khattab al-Kene, and Umayr Identified as Kenya Mall Attackers," news.com.au, October 6, 2013. The Muslim Youth Center's (MYC) reported name change appeared in the latest report from the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, although the entire section on the MYC is redacted and listed as "strictly confidential." Twitter and Tumblr accounts believed to be linked to the MYC, and which release statements in its name, still use the old name, not al-Hijra.

19 Christopher Anzalone, "Kenya's Muslim Youth Center and Al-Shabab's East African Recruitment," *CTC Sentinel* 5:10 (2012).

20 Christopher Anzalone, "Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen's Press Office Opens Twitter Account," al-Wasat blog, December 8, 2011. Al-Shabab's original English language Twitter account has since been closed, but the group's media department appeared to open new accounts as previous ones were suspended by Twitter for "violations of service." See, for example, Feisal Omar, "Al Shabaab's Twitter Account Down after Hostage Threat," Reuters, January 25, 2013.

21 See, for example, Michelle Shepherd, "Tweeting War: Somalia's Al Shabab Joins Twitter," *Toronto Star*, December 8, 2011; Spencer Ackerman, "Somali Terrorists Join Twitter #Propaganda," *Wired*, December 7, 2011; David Smith, "Al-Shabaab in War of Words with Kenyan Army on Twitter," *Guardian*, December 13, 2011; Geoffrey York, "Al-Shabab Goes to War with Kenyan Army on Twitter," *Globe and Mail*, January 11, 2012.

22 The al-Shabab media operatives who run the "HSM Press" account spend a great deal of time and energy, measurable to some degree in a comparative analysis of the numbers of tweets on the subject, pushing forward their counternarrative to that of the Somali government, African Union, the United States, and other international actors. See the analytical data in Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Shiraz Maher, and James Sheehan, *Lights, Camera, Jihad: Al-Shabaab's Western Media Strategy* (London: The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2012), pp. 31-35.

23 Propaganda messaging in English, a language more readily accessible to many in the Western news media, has in the past led to the inflation of the importance of some jihadist publications, such as *Inspire* magazine, and, some argue, personalities, such as the late radical Yemeni-American preacher Anwar al-Awlaki. See J.M. Berger, "Inspiration Inflation," *Foreign Policy*, April 23, 2013; Erik Stier, "Is Anwar al-Awlaki's Importance to Al Qaeda Overstated?" *Christian Science Monitor*, May 10, 2011; Gregory D. Johnsen, "A False Target in Yemen," *New York Times*, November 19, 2010; Thomas Hegghammer, "The Case for Chasing al-Awlaki," *Foreign Policy*, November 24, 2010.

24 Howden.

25 Ibid.

26 These tweets were posted by the now-defunct @HSM_Press Twitter account, September 21-24, 2013. The text of the tweets has been saved by the author.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

of the foremost obligations after faith & defending against the aggressive enemy is our right as Muslims.”³⁰

Al-Shabab's discourse via more traditional channels—such as press statements broadcast on the radio and distributed online via pro-Shabab news websites—delivered similar messages. In an audio statement on September 21, al-Shabab's senior spokesman, Ali Mohamed Rage (also known as Ali Dheere), said that the Westgate Mall attack was in response to the attack by “Christian Kenya” on Somalia via the southern region of Jubba.³¹ The Kenyans, he alleged, committed massacres of Somali civilians, including women and children, with fighter aircraft and heavy weapons.³² The Kenyan government, Rage said, continues to ignore the insurgents' warnings to withdraw from its “illegal” occupation of parts of Somalia or face the consequences at home.³³ Rage painted the attack as an “eye for an eye,” citing the second half of a Qur'anic verse, which reads, “And the one who attacks you, attack him in a manner similar to that which he attacked you.”³⁴ Rage said that the attack was carried out by a specially trained squad of fighters who were “defending” their religion and avenging the innocents killed by the Kenyan military.³⁵

Insurgent Media as an Alternative News Source

Since it emerged in 2007-2008 as the premier insurgent movement fighting the then-Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in Somalia, al-Shabab has expressed an interest in “correcting false news” about itself.³⁶ The latest stage in the evolution of the group's media operations was the rebranding of a part of its media department as the “al-Kataib News Channel,” a source of news about “the mujahidin” that was unbiased and brought “the truth directly from the

battlefield.”³⁷ Through this rebranding effort, al-Shabab promoted its propaganda videos as “documentaries” and a form of “insurgent journalism” that revealed the “truth” in the midst of the falsehoods supposedly being spread by the Western media about the group.³⁸

Advancing its counternarrative is a key part of al-Shabab's media strategy, as is evident by the group's handling of the Westgate Mall story. By claiming to be in close contact with the militants inside the mall, its media operatives garnered a great deal of attention from news media outlets around the world. It is suspected that al-Shabab succeeded multiple times in circumventing attempts to prevent them from micro-blogging by creating a new account each time a Twitter suspension went into effect.³⁹ Al-Shabab also tailored its different Twitter feeds to their different audiences, focusing on more domestic issues via its Somali language Twitter account.⁴⁰ The confused handling of the crisis by the Kenyan government benefited al-Shabab's efforts to manipulate the reporting of the attack, on which it was quick to capitalize. Al-Shabab has undermined its enemies' claims previously as well, releasing photographs showing dead AMISOM soldiers, including close-ups of their identification cards and captured weapons and equipment, following AMISOM denials of suffering casualties in attacks in Somalia.⁴¹

After Westgate: Continuity in Media Operations

On the last day of the attack, al-Shabab's HSM Press Twitter account was still busy disseminating the group's messages and attempting to influence the news cycle. In the early hours of September 24, the group continued to deny reports that the siege had ended, callously noting that “countless dead bodies” were scattered throughout the mall as the attackers continued to hold out.⁴² A still image from closed circuit television from inside the mall showing two of the attackers was also released.⁴³ In a tweet clearly demonstrating that the group's media operatives were well aware of events impacting Muslims outside of Somalia, HSM Press quoted and heralded “mujahid” Michael Adebolajo, one of two young British men charged with murdering off-duty soldier Private Lee Rigby on May 22, 2013, in London. Shortly after Rigby's murder, Adebolajo said that it was an “eye for an eye” response to British aggression against Muslims.⁴⁴ In the tweet, al-Shabab said, “His [attack] was #Woolwich [in London], #Westgate ours!”⁴⁵

The insurgents, via Twitter, also alleged that the Kenyan government had used “chemical agents” in Westgate Mall in a desperate attempt to end the siege.⁴⁶ To cover “their crime,” the HSM Press feed continued, the Kenyan government destroyed the building,

42 HSM Press tweet, September 24, 2013. This account has since been suspended by Twitter. The text of the tweets referenced has been saved by the author.

43 Ibid.

44 Tom Whitehead, David Barrett, and Steven Swinford, “Woolwich Attack: Suspect Michael ‘Mujahid’ Adebolajo Led Away in Handcuffs at Fanatic's Trial,” *Telegraph*, May 23, 2013.

45 HSM Press tweet, September 24, 2013. This account has since been suspended by Twitter. The text of the tweets referenced has been saved by the author. On October 17, al-Shabab's media department released a new propaganda film, *Woolwich Attack: It's an Eye for an Eye*, in Arabic and English versions, heralding Adebolajo and other “lone wolf mujahidin” who, when unable to become foreign fighters in places such as Somalia, have “fulfilled their duty of jihad” in their home countries.

46 HSM Press tweets, September 25, 2013. This account has since been suspended by Twitter. The text of the tweets referenced has been saved by the author. Also see Umberto Bacchi, “Nairobi Westgate Mall Siege: Al-Shabab Accuses Kenyan Troops of Chemical Weapon Use,” *International Business Times*, September 25, 2013.

30 Ibid.

31 Ali Mohamed Rage, “Mujaahidiintu Duulaan Aargoosi ah Ayay Ku qaadeen Kenya,” al-Shabab, September 21, 2013.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 See Qur'an 2:194.

35 Rage, “Mujaahidiintu Duulaan Aargoosi ah Ayay Ku qaadeen Kenya.”

36 “An Important Clarification regarding the Promotion by Al-Jazeera of False News about the Movement [al-Shabab],” al-Shabab, November 24, 2008.

37 “Al-Kataib News Channel,” al-Shabab, July 27, 2010.

38 *The Burundian Bloodbath: Battle of Dayniile*, al-Shabab, November 12, 2011; *Under the Shade of Shari'ah*, al-Shabab, July 1, 2012; Christopher Anzalone, “The Rapid Evolution of Al-Shabab's Media and Insurgent ‘Journalism,’” Open Democracy, November 16, 2011.

39 “Al-Shabab Showed Gruesome Social Media Savvy During Attack,” CBS News, September 24, 2013.

40 Ibid. Cedric Barnes, a Somalia expert working for the International Crisis Group, noted this difference between al-Shabab's English and Somali language media messaging regarding its assault on the Westgate Mall, but the story does not provide any specific examples of these differences.

41 *The Burundian Bloodbath: Battle of Dayniile; Mogadishu: Crusaders' Graveyard*, al-Shabab, July 30, 2010; Christopher Anzalone, “Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen Releases Statement & Information on Burundian AMISOM Soldiers Slain at Battle of Dayniile,” al-Wasat blog, December 12, 2011.

burying scores beneath the rubble.⁴⁷ Al-Shabab also commented on Western media speculation that the so-called “White Widow” (British militant Samantha Lewthwaite) was involved in the attack.⁴⁸ The group denied that “any woman” was involved, stating, “We have an adequate number of young men who are fully committed & we do

“The attack on Westgate Mall provided the group with a media triumph that catapulted it back onto the public stage.”

not employ our sisters in such military operations.”⁴⁹ The insurgents, perhaps aware of potentially damaging public relations, also denied targeting women and children in the attack, saying that they provided them “safe passage,” a claim belied by the evidence.⁵⁰

Al-Shabab repeated its earlier demands to the Kenyan public to pressure their government to withdraw its military forces from Somalia. In exchange, al-Shabab would allow Kenyans to live in peace: “Kenyans, look how fear has gripped your nation...You can put on a brave face but you’re shaken. Your spirit is on the wane & your leaders lack the moral fibre to do the right thing... You could have avoided all this and lived your lives with relative safety. Remove your forces from our country and peace will come.”⁵¹

There is a precedent for al-Shabab’s use of this type of media strategy. The group employed a similar strategy with Uganda and Burundi in 2010 before and after al-Shabab carried out two “martyrdom operations” in Kampala in June of that year.⁵² Before carrying out those attacks, al-Shabab’s al-Kataib Media Foundation released a video in which the unidentified narrator, who spoke impeccable English with a British accent and whose face was not shown, warned the Ugandan and, to a lesser extent, the Burundian people to pressure their governments to withdraw their forces from Somalia, where both militaries formed the backbone of the AMISOM force propping up the weak Somali TFG.⁵³

Following the Kampala attacks, the insurgents released a follow-up video prominently featuring scenes from those attacks. What sounded like the same English-speaking narrator warned the Ugandan public that if the “lessons being taught” against their military forces inside Mogadishu were not clear enough, then perhaps only “lessons a little closer to home” would be the “only solution...You [the Ugandan public] will then pay a hefty price.”⁵⁴ An audio message from al-Shabab leader Godane in the same video portrayed the Kampala attacks as revenge for innocent Somali women, children, and elderly killed by AMISOM in Somalia.⁵⁵ In October 2011, Rage warned the Kenyan public to “consider carefully” the path their government was taking them down by intervening militarily in Somalia, a point he has since reiterated in audio statements regarding the Westgate Mall attack.⁵⁶

has since been suspended by Twitter. The text of the tweets referenced has been saved by the author.

52 Anzalone, “The Rapid Evolution of Al-Shabab’s Media and Insurgent Journalism.”

53 *The African Crusaders: Fighting the West’s War*, al-Shabab, June 27, 2010.

54 *Mogadishu: Crusaders’ Graveyard*.

55 Ibid.

56 Rage, “Mujaahidiintu Duulaan Aargoosi ah Ayay Ku qaadeen Kenya,” al-Shabab, October 2011; Ali Mohamed Rage, “Statement of Shaykh Ali Dheere [Rage],” al-Shabab, September 24, 2013; Ali Mohamed Rage, “Mujaahidiintu Way Ufasaxanyihiin,” al-Shabab, September 22, 2013. The second statement, which is in Arabic, was advertised on the HSM Press Twitter account, first with an Arabic and then an English tweet.

Aware of the media frenzy surrounding the Westgate Mall attack, the HSM Press feed began advertising in advance a forthcoming audio statement from Godane on the afternoon of September 24.⁵⁷ Godane’s statement was released the next day and distributed on pro-Shabab Somali news websites, jihadist forums, and on Twitter, first with a Somali language tweet and, soon after, two English language tweets with links to official English written and audio translations of the statement.⁵⁸ The audio translation was read by what sounded like the same individual, speaking with a British accent, who debuted in al-Shabab’s English language

“As al-Shabab’s battlefield capabilities continue to deteriorate, the strategic benefits of low-cost acts of terrorism and asymmetric warfare increase, and the group is likely to turn to such actions in a bid to remain a relevant force both inside and outside Somalia.”

video productions during the summer of 2010. The release of written and audio English translations of Godane’s statement within hours of the release of the original demonstrated the group’s media savvy in capitalizing on and even feeding the worldwide media attention surrounding the attack.⁵⁹

Dubbing the attack the “Badr Nairobi” in reference to the Prophet Muhammad’s first major battle in 624 AD, Godane eulogized the “martyrdom-seekers” who carried out the attack and stated that the

57 HSM Press tweet, September 24, 2013. This account has since been suspended by Twitter. The text of the tweets referenced has been saved by the author.

58 HSM Press tweets, September 25, 2013. This account has since been suspended by Twitter. The text of the tweets referenced has been saved by the author.

59 It is possible that al-Shabab decided to produce an English audio translation of Godane’s statement to make it easier for television and radio outlets to play excerpts in their broadcasts.

47 HSM Press tweet, September 25, 2013. This account has since been suspended by Twitter. The text of the tweets referenced has been saved by the author. Also see Afua Hirsch, “Kenya Mall Attack: Dozens More Bodies Believed Buried Under Rubble,” *Guardian*, September 26, 2013.

48 Mike Pflanz, “Britain’s Shadowy ‘White Widow’ Linked to SEAL Team Target in Somalia,” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 8, 2013.

49 HSM Press tweets, September 24, 2013. This account has since been suspended by Twitter. The text of the tweets referenced has been saved by the author.

50 HSM Press tweets, September 24, 2013. This account has since been suspended by Twitter. The text of the tweets referenced has been saved by the author. Stating that they have “no interest” in harming women and children, the group claimed that it did everything “practically possible” to remove women and children from the mall.

51 HSM Press tweets, September 24, 2013. This account

operation was in response to Kenya's military intervention inside Somalia.⁶⁰ The "success" of the attack, he said, once again showed the "power of faith, which 'nothing can stand against,' revealing weaknesses in the Kenyan government, military, and police."⁶¹ As he did to the Ugandan public following the Kampala bombings in 2010, Godane addressed the Kenyan public by telling them to leave Somalia. "You have entered into a war that is not yours and is against your national interests...you have voluntarily given up your security and economy and have lost many of your sons," he said, arguing that because they elected their politicians, they bear the responsibility of "the massacres that are being perpetrated by your military in Kismayo and the neighboring regions."⁶²

Conclusion

The Westgate Mall attack has returned the beleaguered al-Shabab militant group into worldwide headlines. Wracked by internal divisions—most notably the public spat between al-Shabab's senior leadership under Godane and dissidents such as Omar Hammami as well as former senior leaders within the group itself—al-Shabab was in need of relief. The attack on Westgate Mall provided the group with a media triumph that catapulted it back onto the public stage.

The long-term military significance of the attack is unknown at this time. While it is unlikely that it will result in significant military gains for al-Shabab on the ground in Somalia, it may lead to strategic gains for the group in the short-term, particularly if there is a heavy-handed response from the Kenyan government that targets the hundreds of thousands of Somalis living in Kenya.⁶³ The increased media attention may also prove to be a mixed blessing for al-Shabab. On the one hand, it renews its relevance in the eyes of potential supporters at home and abroad. On the other hand, it will intensify the drive by powerful international actors such as

the African Union, the United States, and the United Kingdom to target al-Shabab's leadership in the hopes of eliminating it as an international threat.

The attack may not lead to a Kenyan military withdrawal from Somalia, but it could be a harbinger of a continuing shift by al-Shabab back to asymmetric warfare. The group might carry out more attacks on soft targets, such as civilian centers and non-military sites, to bleed the fledgling Somali federal government and its African Union backers. Indeed, the insurgents began shifting back to their guerrilla roots in August 2011 when they withdrew from Mogadishu in the face of a mounting offensive by AMISOM, the TFG, and allied Somali militias. This followed al-Shabab's failure to drive out AMISOM and the TFG from Mogadishu.

As al-Shabab's battlefield capabilities continue to deteriorate, the strategic benefits of low-cost acts of terrorism and asymmetric warfare increase, and the group is likely to turn to such actions in a bid to remain a relevant force both inside and outside Somalia.

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The Dutch Foreign Fighter Contingent in Syria

By Samar Batrawi

SINCE THE START of the Syrian civil war in 2011, foreign fighters have increasingly traveled to Syria to fight against the Bashar al-Assad regime. Many of these foreign fighters have joined the more extremist Salafi-jihadi rebel groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra or Jaysh al-Muhajirin wa-al-Ansar. They have come from several different countries, including Western states such as the United Kingdom and Sweden.

This article examines the presence of Dutch fighters in the Syrian civil war. It also identifies the Netherlands-based networks and individuals to which these foreign fighters have links and describes what is known about their activities in Syria. It finds that at least 20 people from the Netherlands have joined the war in Syria, and at least six of them have died there.¹ Although the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) of the Netherlands has not found evidence that Netherlands-based networks have actively recruited Dutch Muslims to fight in Syria, the AIVD does believe that groups such as Sharia4Holland, Behind Bars, Hizb al-Tahrir and

1 In February 2013, the head of the AIVD, Rob Bertholée, said in a Dutch news broadcast that "tens" of young Dutch Muslims were fighting in Syria. The estimate of 20 people from the Netherlands fighting in Syria is based on the author's research. After identifying Dutch fighters in Syria through social media and other open sources, the author attempted to corroborate those names with AIVD and Dutch government publications and statements, available police records, and sources such as community blogs and websites. By cross-checking all available open source information, the author tried to paint a rough sketch that is as accurate as possible. One limitation is that unless the AIVD or Dutch government confirms that a Dutch citizen has traveled to or died in Syria, it is not possible to determine whether a Dutch fighter is a Dutch citizen or a former resident. They might have a Dutch passport but they could also hold a permit. What was more important to the author, however, was that all 20 of the fighters had a clear history of living in the Netherlands, whether as citizens or residents, which made them part of a certain network and community and part of the Dutch socioeconomic and political context. For some of the details on the deaths of the fighters, see "Opnieuw Nederlandse Syriëganger gedood," *Trouw*, October 17, 2013.

60 Ahmed Godane, "Badr Nairobi," al-Shabab, September 25, 2013.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 "Westgate Attack: MPs to Call for Refugee Camps to Close," BBC, September 30, 2013; "Number of Somali Refugees in Horn of Africa Passes 1 Million Mark," United Nations Refugee Agency, July 17, 2012.

Millatu Ibrahim are increasingly utilizing the developments in Syria to promote their cause, which in turn has a potential radicalizing influence on their supporters.²

Background on the Fighters

The AIVD considers Dutch nationals fighting in Syria as a significant threat to the national security of the Netherlands due to their radicalizing influence on Dutch society.³ This has resulted in several attempts to address the issue on a judicial level by criminalizing so-called “jihad travel.”⁴ The AIVD maintains that there are no recruiting networks or individuals in the Netherlands, yet several concerned

parents of foreign fighters have approached the media claiming the contrary.⁵

This author has identified at least 20 individuals from the Netherlands who have fought or are fighting in Syria, although there could be more than 100.⁶ At this point, it is not possible to access specific details about the fighters’ backgrounds—such as their socioeconomic positions—but in some of the cases there is enough information to paint a rough sketch of these foreign fighters.

The majority of the 20 identified Dutch foreign fighters came from Moroccan, Somali and Turkish communities in the Netherlands, although one Dutch man was originally from Bosnia.⁷ Most commonly, the individuals in question are of Moroccan descent.⁸

2 According to the AIVD, “Several members of radical Islamist organisations such as Sharia4Holland and Behind Bars are among those that left to Syria to join the jihad. This is indicative of how blurred the line between radicalism and jihadism has become. These movements have created an environment in which people with similar ideas meet and develop radical ideas into jihadist ideologies. This group dynamic has led to a rapid radicalization of many individuals as well as concrete attempts to join the jihad in Syria.” See “Jaarverslag 2012: technologisering bepaalt dreigingsbeeld,” General Intelligence and Security Service of the Netherlands, 2012, p. 24.

3 As the AIVD states on their website, “The number of jihadist travelers is growing every year. Dutch jihadists are becoming more and more successful in connecting themselves to key international figures in these networks. If these people return to the Netherlands they will take with them all the contacts and skills that they acquired during their period abroad. This makes it possible for them to commit attacks or to support other jihadists in planning attacks in the West. Returning jihadists enjoy a significant degree of prestige, they are militant and they are capable of influencing others. They are therefore a radicalizing force.” See the AIVD statement on movements of terrorism: “Reisbewegingen jihadistisch terrorisme,” General Intelligence and Security Service of the Netherlands, September 2013.

4 The legal aspects of this issue are complex and seem to be developing rapidly as the Netherlands attempts to cope with this phenomenon on a judicial level. A new Dutch law, Article 134a, states that any acts that serve as preparation for terrorist acts are punishable by law. It is a broad article that can encompass a wide range of “terrorist” activities as well as “preparatory acts.” In October 2013, for the first time Dutch “Syria fighters” were convicted in the Netherlands for planning to undertake a “jihad trip.” It remains to be seen what the effect of this sentence will be in terms of preventing more Dutch citizens from attempting to undertake such travel, but the sentence will probably prove to be an important legal precedent for the criminalization of traveling abroad to join jihadist causes. See “First Conviction of Syria Travelers,” NOS News, October 23, 2013.

5 “AIVD: geen aanwijzing ronselen jihadstrijders,” *De Volkskrant*, April 16, 2013; Janny Groen, “Ouders woevend op AIVD: wel ronselaars voor Syrië,” *De Volkskrant*, April 18, 2013.

6 Although this author has identified 20 people from the Netherlands who have traveled to Syria to fight, other estimates and claims of the leader of the Dutch jihadists in Syria, known as Abu Fidaa, place the number at about 100.

7 Various newspapers have identified several Dutch nationals fighting in Syria. They include: Saddek Sbaa (Moroccan-Dutch, died in Sahil, at age 20), Sofian M. (21-years-old from Zeist), Jordi de Jong (20-years-old from Delft), Soufiane Elfassi (20-years-old from Delft/Rotterdam, died in Syria), Choukri Masali ‘Abu Walae’ (Moroccan-Dutch man who died in Syria and was possibly fighting for Jabhat al-Nusra), Mourad Masali (20-year-old Moroccan-Dutch man from Delft who died in Syria and was possibly fighting for Jabhat al-Nusra), Abu Fidaa (leader and spokesperson of the Dutch fighters) and Victor Droste (also known as Zakaria al-Holandi, a 26-year-old Dutch convert to Islam). More recently, obituaries have been posted on the new Facebook page for Dutch jihadists in Syria, available at www.facebook.com/pages/Nederlandse-Mujahideen-in-Syri%C3%AB/142765595912474. An archive of past statements from that Facebook page is located at www.ahlussunnahpublicaties.wordpress.com/2013/06/19/archief-nederlandse-mujahideen-in-syrie. For videos showing the Dutch-Bosnian man, see www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=ceNsOnDon90 and www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6u5whMSOus.

8 At least nine out of the 20 are of Moroccan descent. There are about 360,000 Moroccans in the Netherlands, most of whom are second-generation immigrants, making them the second largest non-Western group of immigrants in the country. Turks are the largest minority group in the Netherlands, with a population of ap-

proximately 390,000 (of the 20 Dutch people fighting in Syria, at least three are of Turkish descent). These details are drawn from “Bevolking; kerncijfers,” Central Bureau for Statistics of the Netherlands, April 5, 2013. A 2010 research study examined these groups, and it found that differences between Moroccans and Turks are at times significant: Moroccans scored much higher on all indicators of religiousness than Turks. For details on that study, see Paul M. de Graaf et al., “Sociaal-culturele verschillen tussen Turken, Marokkanen en autochtonen: eerste resultaten van de Nederlandse LevensLoop Studie (NELLS),” Central Bureau for Statistics of the Netherlands, 2011.

There are several organizations that are at least affiliated with some of the 20 individuals in question. This affiliation ranges from featuring obituaries and supportive statements on the website *De Ware Religie*¹¹ (The True Religion) to alleged recruitment through individuals active in the groups Behind Bars and Sharia4Holland, several of which have been on “jihad trips” before and enjoy respect and authority within their communities.¹²

9 The Schilderswijk neighborhood of The Hague was recently the focus of a report in *Trouw* because of the actions of some of its Salafist residents. Salafists in Schilderswijk have tried to enforce Shari’a-like social laws on residents, such as dress codes for women or norms about alcohol and smoking. Dozens of residents told the *Trouw* newspaper that the neighborhood is known as the “Shari’a Triangle”—a reference to the part of the neighborhood called the “forgotten triangle” after it was left out of an urban renewal plan. The area is also home to the Salafist As-Soennah Mosque. For details, see Perdiep Ramesar, “Haagse buurt domein orthodoxe moslims,” *Trouw*, May 18, 2013.

10 These trends became clear as the author continued to document all information available about the Dutch fighters. It is also confirmed by Edwin Bakker, professor of Terrorism and Counterterrorism at Leiden University in the Netherlands, who stated that many of the young Dutch fighters in Syria are from The Hague. See “Veel Nederlandse strijders Syrië komen uit Den Haag,” *Omroep West*, April 18, 2013.

11 *De Ware Religie* (The True Religion) is a Dutch-language website that expresses radical Islamist views, publishing relevant news articles, opinion pieces and sometimes even obituaries for Dutch jihadists in Syria.

12 These groups all operate openly in the Netherlands, although they are controversial and their activities are monitored by the AIVD. See “Sharia4Holland speelt rol bij jihad-reizen,” *De Volkskrant*, April 24, 2013; “Nederland vast in Marokko om ronselen voor Syrië,” *De Volkskrant*, May 25, 2013.

Most of the men in Syria are estimated to be between the ages of 23 and 26, with the exception of a couple of Dutch minors who managed to undertake the journey to Syria.¹³

Based on pieces of information drawn from the 20 profiles, most of the fighters reached Syria by flying from either the Netherlands or Belgium to Turkey, where they crossed into Syria from the Turkish border.¹⁴

Profiles and Recruiters

In September 2013, the Dutch website De Ware Religie posted an obituary for a 19-year-old Dutch man, known as Abu Abdurrahman, who fought alongside “Islamic rebels” since June 2013.¹⁵ Abdurrahman, from The Hague, left for the north of Syria with one of his best friends, where he fought with several other Dutch people.¹⁶ The website claimed that he died during a surprise attack on the enemy, launched from a recently captured area which Abdurrahman was in charge of patrolling. His real first name was Soufian, and he was killed along with one other Dutch national. Abdurrahman is the most recent Dutch casualty in the Syrian conflict. De Ware Religie appeared to acquire the details on Abdurrahman’s alleged activities from a statement¹⁷ published by the Dutch-language Facebook page “Nederlandse Mujahideen in Syrië” (Dutch Mujahidin in Syria).¹⁸

13 This estimate was from Abu Fidaa, who was interviewed in Janny Groen, “Lees hier de onverkorte versie van het interview met de Nederlandse jihadstrijders,” *De Volkskrant*, June 15, 2013.

14 For one case, see “Tegengehouden Syriëganger voor de rechter,” *De Volkskrant*, July 31, 2013.

15 These details were reported on the controversial website De Ware Religie in September 2013. For details, see “Actueel Opnieuw martelaarschap voor Nederlandse man in Syrië,” *dewareregelie.nl*, September 19, 2013.

16 Ibid.

17 A PDF of the statement is available at www.app.box.com/s/6o9ppnwafisatkpkxlcj.

18 The Facebook page “Nederlandse Mujahideen in Syrië” started in May 2013. It publishes pictures and obituaries for Dutch fighters in Syria. It has also posted several pictures of a Dutch- and Arabic-language Qur’an being held up in front of a pile of weapons (a picture that was not spread through any other source). It is unclear who runs the website, although some original postings of pictures and statements (such as obituaries) indicate that either individuals in Syria are updating the page or that the people who run the Facebook page have good

The first known Dutch national to die in Syria was 21-year-old Mourad Massali, a Dutch-Moroccan man from Delft, who was killed in March 2013.¹⁹ According to his friends and family, who cooperated with a Dutch news organization in a series of interviews, Massali became more radical after the death of his father.²⁰ He was part of a Delft-based group of friends of about 20 young people, many of whom have criminal records.²¹ According to friends, many of these young people viewed engaging in the conflict in Syria as a form of penance for their sins.²² Massali’s friend, 20-year-old Soufian Elfassi from Delft, was the second Dutch national to die in Syria; he was killed in March 2013.²³ Elfassi played for the local soccer team Delfia, whose president was surprised to hear of Elfassi’s travel to Syria as he did not perceive him to be radical, nor did he ever hear him voice a clear opinion on Syria.²⁴ When Elfassi left for Syria in December 2012, he told his colleagues that he was leaving to study at a university in Egypt. Massali’s 26-year-old brother Choukri was killed in July 2013, according to a statement by the Dutch fighters.

Alleged recruiters have received significant attention from the media and the government in the Netherlands. A 19-year-old woman from Zoetermeer, known as Oum Usama, was suspected of recruiting people to join the war in Syria.²⁵ Her arrest in July 2013 triggered a campaign in which Behind Bars and Sharia4Holland demanded her release.²⁶ In August 2013, her Facebook page claimed that she had left the Netherlands for Syria.²⁷

contacts with fighters in Syria. The page is located at www.facebook.com/pages/Nederlandse-Mujahideen-in-Syri%C3%AB/142765595912474.

19 Janny Groen, “Nederlandse jihadist gedood in Syrië,” *De Volkskrant*, March 20, 2013.

20 “Mourad was een goede jongen,” *NOS Journaal*, March 20, 2013.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 “Tweede Nederlandse jihadist gedood in Syrië,” *Algemeen Dagblad*, March 21, 2013.

24 “Na Mourad Massali ook Sofian Elfassi: van voetballer met een baardje tot jihadist,” *Media Werkgroep Syrië*, March 21, 2013.

25 “Demonstratie voor vrijlating Zoetermeerse Oum Usama,” *Omroep West*, July 29, 2013.

26 Ibid.

27 “Oum Usama vertrokken naar Syrië,” *dewareregelie.nl*, August 26, 2013.

An April 2013 article in *De Volkskrant* voiced the frustration of parents of Dutch fighters, who felt that their concerns about the recruitment of young Muslims had not been taken seriously by the AIVD.²⁸ Murat Ofkeli (also known as “Ibrahim the Turk,” “Abu Jarrah” or “Abu Zer”) from Schilderswijk in The Hague was one of the names mentioned by these parents as a potential recruiter.²⁹ The AIVD had monitored him since 2001 after suspicions arose that he might be recruiting young Muslims for jihadist conflicts abroad.³⁰ Two years later, Ofkeli was cleared of charges accusing him of recruiting individuals for jihad.³¹ In 2005, he came to the authorities’ attention once again when three young men from The Hague, who he had allegedly recruited, were arrested in Azerbaijan on their way to fight in Chechnya.³² He was also suspected to be a member of the Hofstad Group,³³ but he was cleared of all charges due to a lack of evidence.³⁴

The parents of the young Muslims who Ofkeli allegedly recruited told *De Volkskrant* that he remained active as a recruiter even after 2005.³⁵ He would wait for young people to finish praying in the Turkish Mimar Sinan mosque in Schilderswijk in The Hague, the parents alleged.³⁶ Several parents said they overheard Ofkeli speaking about the jihadist struggle and about conducting

nl, August 26, 2013.

28 Groen, “Ouders woedend op AIVD: wel ronselaars voor Syrië.”

29 Ibid.

30 “Ambtsbericht,” General Intelligence and Security Service of the Netherlands, August 27, 2007.

31 “Five Suspects in Jihad Case Cleared of Charges,” *De Volkskrant*, October 31, 2007.

32 Ibid. Dutch authorities did not have sufficient grounds to convict him. For details on this case, see Janny Groen and Annieke Kranenberg, “Vrijspraak vijf verdachten jihadzaak,” *De Volkskrant*, October 31, 2007.

33 The Hofstad Group was a network of radical Islamic youth, 14 of whom were suspected of participation in terrorist activities. The individual who killed Dutch artist Theo van Gogh was a member of this group. The group was founded in 2003 and it is listed as a terrorist organization by the Dutch National Coordinator for Counterterrorism (NCTb) and the Council of the European Union.

34 “Recherche arresteert zes ‘jihad-ronselaars,’” *Elsevier*, November 7, 2006.

35 Groen, “Ouders woedend op AIVD: wel ronselaars voor Syrië.”

36 Ibid.

attacks.³⁷ Ofkeli was already banned from the As-Soennah Mosque in The Hague for his controversial behavior.³⁸ In June 2013, Dutch media reported that Murat Ofkeli had died in Syria.³⁹

Azedine C. (also known as “Aboe Moussa”) is another name mentioned in three separate accounts of concerned parents.⁴⁰ He is an active member of the group Behind Bars.⁴¹ Azedine is a frequent commentator on the website De Ware Religie, where he has also published a statement regarding his alleged recruitment of young Dutch Muslims to join the struggle in Syria. He denied any form of brainwashing and did not take or deny responsibility for facilitating their travel, but insisted that these individuals were voluntarily committed to a just cause.⁴²

Activities in Syria

The leader and spokesperson of Dutch fighters in Syria, Abu Fidaa, gave a critical interview to *De Volkskrant* in June 2013.⁴³ The interview is the single most useful source for uncovering details about the activities of Dutch fighters in Syria, even though it is difficult to verify the extent to which his account is true. Abu Fidaa stated that Dutch fighters do not leave for Syria without preparation, although it is difficult to adequately prepare for jihad in the Netherlands without drawing the attention of the AIVD.⁴⁴ He mentioned that in his case he would read American and Chinese books about power and warfare such as *48 Laws of Power* and *The Thirty-Six Stratagems of War*, books which were recommended to him by likeminded friends.⁴⁵ For physical training, he said, some “brothers” go out and jog

together in the Netherlands.⁴⁶ Anything more combat-specific than that is not possible, but at least this allows them to be in adequate shape before arriving in Syria for more serious training.⁴⁷

Abu Fidaa explained that when a new “brother” arrives in Syria, he receives training that lasts six weeks.⁴⁸ After a minimum of six weeks of training, one has the right to seek martyrdom.⁴⁹ According to Abu Fidaa, there are daily meetings during which Dutch “brothers” talk to each other and receive news updates from fellow fighters who are able to speak Arabic.⁵⁰ Dutch fighters mix with other nationalities to improve their integration into a strong jihadist community.⁵¹ Abu Fidaa, however, did not identify which rebel groups the Dutch fighters have primarily joined.

Although Abu Fidaa and the fighters that surround him are reportedly located in Aleppo, this is not the only place where Dutch fighters are based. According to Abu Fidaa, they are spread across the entire country. The fighters attend classes by scholars and “knowledgeable brothers.”⁵² They also take time to relax and swim, exercise or visit Dutch fighters in other areas. The locals often invite the fighters over for dinner, during which the fighters tell Syrians about the manner in which Muslims are treated in the Netherlands—how they live as a minority that is regarded with contempt, as slaves under a capitalist system.⁵³ There are at least three Dutch women in Syria, according to Abu Fidaa. These women joined their husbands when they decided to fight in Syria.

Abu Fidaa was confident that the jihadists in Syria have an excellent strategy. He claimed that they can easily uncover a spy, and that their long-term vision gives them ideological and strategic strength. This is the advantage they have over secular groups, said

Abu Fidaa. The non-secular rebels do not look at Syria in a vacuum; after freeing Syria from Bashar al-Assad, he explained, they will help their Palestinian brothers. According to Abu Fidaa,

We are not planning to return [to the Netherlands]. Freeing Syria will take a while. A true mujahid will never be able to leave Syria...If we give up at any point, all our efforts and the efforts of people before us will have been for nothing. That is why it is so important to be honest and to cleanse your intentions during the jihad. Brothers from the Netherlands and Belgium feel good here and they do not want to return. The Armageddon will happen in this area and we do not want to miss this. The mujahidin who risked their lives for this cause will not accept anything else than Shari`a for Syria. They will not make the mistake of replacing an unjust tyrant for another unjust tyrant.⁵⁴

Abu Fidaa also addressed the biggest concern for Dutch authorities: what will these fighters do if they return to Europe or the Netherlands? “The media claims that Muslims who go to Syria can be a danger to the Netherlands,” Abu Fidaa acknowledged. “There is fear for possible attacks in the Netherlands when these people return. The opposite is true, however.” He then said, “If the West keeps stopping Muslims and making it difficult for them to go to Syria and other Islamic countries... then certain diligent Muslims—whose conscience will bother them—will plan attacks on Western soil. We advise the Dutch and other Western governments to stop forming an obstacle for Muslims that wish to leave for those places in need of help.”⁵⁵

Conclusion

Unfortunately, there is not enough data on fighters from the Netherlands to draw meaningful conclusions about what has driven them to make certain decisions, the extent to which recruiters influenced their decisions and whether or not they will return to the Netherlands. For now, their focus remains on Syria, although

37 Ibid.

38 “Recherche arresteert zes ‘jihad-ronselaars.’”

39 “Derde Nederlandse Syriëganger gesneuveld,” *Omroep West*, June 29, 2013.

40 Groen, “Ouders woedend op AIVD: wel ronselaars voor Syrië.”

41 See the YouTube video of Azedine C., posted by Behind Bars, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=5N6gEsPvz2s&feature=c4-overview&list=UUjJd66kwqfHotkOqKB3RdOg.

42 “Iedereen is schuldig, behalve wij!” dewarereligie.nl, May 7, 2013.

43 Janny Groen, “Interview met Nederlandse strijders in Syrië: ‘De jihad werkt therapeutisch,’” *De Volkskrant*, June 15, 2013.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

the networks linked to them in the Netherlands might prove to be a more immediate threat in terms of radicalization.

Much of this is linked to broader political and societal developments in the Netherlands, such as the problems that second and third generation immigrants face and the continuing polarization of Dutch society. At the same time, the obstacles that these individuals confronted in Dutch society are memories they carry with them and share with their fellow jihadists abroad.⁵⁶ While Dutch territory is not the main battlefield for these fighters at this point in time, they carry grievances about the treatment of Muslims in the Netherlands. These grievances might fuel frustration, and in time may prove to be a threat to the Netherlands. This is where the existing networks in the Netherlands and their radicalizing potential must be understood, as their actual connections to transnational jihadist networks are unclear.

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⁵⁶ These obstacles include socioeconomic marginalization, discrimination against non-Western immigrants and the lack of a comprehensive integration plan for non-Western minorities in Dutch society. Apart from affecting the prospects of non-Western immigrants on a socioeconomic level, these obstacles contribute to the more general climate of polarization and segregation in the Netherlands, in which radical Islamism, and also the far right, experiences a surge in popularity and activism. See the annual integration report of the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics for more information on the obstacles that non-Western immigrants face, available at www.cbs.nl/nl-NL/menu/themas/dossiers/allochtonen/publicaties/publicaties/archief/2012/2012-b61-pub.htm, as well as the 2008 trend analysis by the Dutch government called "Polarisation and Radicalisation."

Jordanian Jihadists Active in Syria

By Suha Philip Ma'ayeh

SINCE THE START OF the rebellion against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in 2011, Jordanian foreign fighters have traveled to Syria to fight with the opposition. What began as a small trickle of Jordanian militants has swelled as the conflict evolved from a popular uprising into a civil war of regional proportions. At the start of the uprising, Jordanian jihadists viewed participation in the Syrian war as a religious duty to fight against an autocratic, Alawite regime. Their hope is that the fall of al-Assad will result in the establishment of a Sunni Islamic state. This conviction intensified as the war became increasingly sectarian. Galvanized by the involvement of Iran and Hizb Allah, and the subsequent calls for jihad against al-Assad by Sunni clerics, Jordanian jihadists considered it their obligation to defend Sunnis in Syria.¹

This article provides background on Jordanian jihadists who have traveled to fight in Syria. It finds that many of these militants have joined the al-Qa`ida-linked rebel group Jabhat al-Nusra, a development that could threaten the security of the Jordanian state.²

Jihadist Activity in Jordan

General estimates place the number of Salafi-jihadis³ in Jordan at a few thousand, some of whom are veterans of the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁴ Al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI), for example, was led by the prominent Jordanian jihadist Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi. Al-Zarqawi, who was killed in June 2006, was responsible for the triple

Amman hotel bombings, a terrorist attack that killed 60 people in Jordan in 2005.⁵ Moreover, al-Zarqawi's spiritual mentor, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a Jordanian citizen of Palestinian origin, is a prominent proponent of Salafi-jihadism in Jordan.⁶

The Jordanian government views Salafi-jihadis as extremists, and tensions between the banned movement and the government are longstanding.⁷ In April 2011, for example, 400 Salafi-jihadi protesters demanded the release of prisoners and clashed with police—a demonstration that resulted in the stabbings of four policemen.⁸ Various reports suggest that support for Salafi-jihadis is gaining ground in the Jordanian cities of Maan and Zarqa, the latter of which was al-Zarqawi's hometown.⁹ Tensions became more pronounced as the war in Syria escalated. In January 2013, Jordanian King Abdullah warned that "the new Taliban we are going to have to deal with are in Syria," adding that it might take two years to clean up the "bad elements," in reference to jihadists in Syria.¹⁰

In October 2012, authorities foiled a plot targeting Jordan. Jordanian authorities arrested 11 Jordanians who were accused of plotting to bomb shopping malls and Western diplomatic missions in Amman, using weapons and explosives smuggled into Jordan from Syria.¹¹ The militants reportedly planned to execute their attacks in stages.¹² They first planned to target shopping centers and foreigners in Jordanian

⁵ Hassan M. Fattah and Michael Slackman, "3 Hotels Bombed in Jordan; At Least 57 Die," *New York Times*, November 10, 2005.

⁶ Osama al-Sharif, "Rise of Local Salafist Jihadists Worries Jordan's Government," *al-Monitor*, July 3, 2013.

⁷ Suha Philip Ma'ayeh, "Salafists Clash with Jordan Police," *The National*, April 16, 2011.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Al-Sharif.

¹⁰ Alistair Lyon and Suleiman al-Khalidi, "Jordan Staggers Under Fallout of Syria Conflict," Reuters, February 1, 2013.

¹¹ Ranya Kadri, "Jordan Says 11 Plotted a Series of Attacks," *New York Times*, October 21, 2012; Jamal Halaby, "Jordan Says it Foils Al-Qaida-Linked Terror Plot," *Huffington Post*, October 21, 2012.

¹² Ibid.

hotels.¹³ After those initial attacks, they wanted to execute more deadly attacks using powerful explosives on Western diplomatic missions and “vital national sites.”¹⁴ Jordanian authorities identified some of the men as belonging to the banned Salafi-jihadi movement in Jordan.¹⁵ Abed Shehadeh al-Tahawi, who leads Jordan’s Salafi-jihadi movement, told the Associated Press that he “recognized at least half of the people shown on television...They are members of my group, but they have nothing to do with what is said to be a ‘terror plot.’”¹⁶ Although some have expressed skepticism about the plot, the conflict in Syria has clearly stirred up Jordan’s jihadist community.¹⁷

In September 2013, for example, Jordanian authorities acted again, jailing five Jordanian Salafi-jihadis for trying to join Jabhat al-Nusra.¹⁸ In total, Jordanian authorities have arrested approximately 68 individuals in connection with the war in Syria, 47 of whom are facing trial in a state security court.¹⁹

Jordanian Jihadists in Syria

Security is tight on the Jordan-Syria border, but it is believed that authorities turned a blind eye in the early months of the revolution, which made it easier for jihadists to enter Syria.²⁰ In February 2013, for example, the *Jordan Times* reported the death of a 17-year-old Jordanian who was fighting with Jabhat al-Nusra in Deraa.²¹ In August 2013, *al-Ghad* reported the death of a 29-year-old Jordanian jihadist in Deraa who was also fighting with Jabhat al-Nusra.²² Thus far, it is estimated that at

least 100 Jordanian jihadists have been killed in Syria.²³

It is not possible to identify the exact number of Jordanian fighters in Syria. Yet Mohammed al-Shalabi, a Salafi-jihadi leader in Jordan, said between 700-800 Jordanians have joined the jihad in Syria.²⁴ Al-Shalabi, also known as “Abu Sayyaf,” told reporters, “As the battle to defend the Muslim nation from the Godless regime of Assad continues, more are willing to join the fight.” Other reports place the number at 500.²⁵

Among those killed include Mahmoud Abdul Al, the son-in-law of prominent Salafi-jihadi shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Tahawi. Abdul Al blew himself up in Deraa in October 2012.²⁶ In a video commemorating his son-in-law’s death produced by the jihadist website Ma’asada, al-Tahawi called for the reestablishment of the caliphate, and urged Salafi-jihadis to rise and defend themselves against the enemies of Islam.²⁷ He was also blunt in his support for Jabhat al-Nusra.²⁸ Al-Tahawi spoke about a *fatwa* he issued stipulating that it is the responsibility of any good Muslim to stop the bloodshed perpetrated by the Alawite regime in Syria.²⁹ In an interview, al-Tahawi said that “Muslims in Syria have been oppressed by Assad’s brutal and barbaric regime; therefore, according to Islam, it is obligatory for any able-

bodied Muslim to support his brothers there.”³⁰

Al-Tahawi’s call to action is not an isolated occurrence. In the wake of reports about Iran and Hizb Allah’s role in defending the al-Assad regime, other Sunni clerics called on Muslims to join the rebels in Syria.³¹ The Salafi-jihadi leader al-Shalabi said, “This jihad is to defend Ahl al-Sunna [Sunni Islam]. It is obligatory. When the war turned sectarian, it became a motive not only for members of the movement but also for the public at large to join the mujahidin, especially after Hizb Allah and Iran interfered.”³² Al-Qa’ida chief Ayman al-Zawahiri also called on Sunni Muslims to unite and join the war in Syria.³³

In the early months of the war, Jordanian jihadists crossed the border in the southern Syrian provinces of Deraa and Reef Damascus.³⁴ They also had a presence in the eastern and western areas of Syria, including Deir al-Zour, Aleppo and Homs.³⁵ Hasan Abu Hanieh, an expert on Islamic groups, argued that the Jordanian government at first turned a blind eye to the flow of Jordanian jihadists in Syria, hoping that jihadists in Jordan would enter Syria and die there.³⁶ Yet as the civil war continued, the Jordanian government began to harden its 230-mile border with Syria, arresting dozens of jihadists trying to enter the war-torn country, and foiled attempts to smuggle arms from Syria into Jordan.³⁷ These border restrictions prompted Jordanian jihadists to travel to Turkey before entering Syria from the north.³⁸ The Turkish-Syria border has been used by hundreds of other jihadists who flocked from Libya, Tunisia, Lebanon,

Killed in Syria,” *al-Ghad*, August 4, 2013.

23 Al-Shalabi made statements to the local media on Salafi-jihadis who were killed, their names and from which city they came. Also see Muwaffaq Kamal, “10 Salafists Enter Aleppo Through Turkey,” *al-Ghad*, October 7, 2013; Muwaffaq Kamal, “The Salafi Jihadi Denies Establishing a Murabitoon Brigade,” *al-Ghad*, September 23, 2013.

24 Personal interview, Mohammed al-Shalabi, a Jordanian Salafi-jihadi leader, August 9, 2013; “Teenage Jordanian ‘Jihadist’ Killed in Syria.”

25 “Teenage Jordanian ‘Jihadist’ Killed in Syria.”

26 Murad Batal al-Shishani, “Jordan’s Jihadists Drawn to Syria Conflict,” BBC, October 29, 2012.

27 This video is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5GD1eaRTA.

28 “Jordanian Salafi-Jihadi Leader Abu Muhammad Al-Tahawi: ‘America, You Are The Main Target On The Mujahideen’s Agenda,’” Middle East Media Research Institute, December 30, 2012.

29 Mona Alami, “Calls for Jihad Split Salafist Movement,” Inter Press Service, June 3, 2013.

30 Murad Batal al-Shishani, “Syria Emerges as a New Battlefield for Jordan’s Jihadists,” *Terrorism Monitor* 11:1 (2013).

31 Fahmy.

32 Personal interview, Mohammed al-Shalabi, a Jordanian Salafi-jihadi leader, August 9, 2013.

33 “Qaeda Leader Urges Muslims to Fight in Syria,” *al-Arabiya*, June 6, 2013.

34 Personal interview, Hasan Abu Hanieh, expert on Islamic groups, August 13, 2013.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Kamal, “10 Salafists Enter Aleppo Through Turkey.”

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid. Mohammad al-Najjar, “Jordan Dismantles a Cell That Planned Quality Operations,” *al-Jazira*, October 21, 2012.

16 Ibid.

17 Suleiman al-Khalidi, “Syrian Jihadist Spillover Haunts Jordan,” Reuters, October 28, 2013.

18 “Jordan Fights Wave of Syria Jihad With Heavy Jail Sentences,” Middle East Online, September 23, 2013.

19 Personal interview, Musa Abdullat, legal representative and defense attorney for Salafi-jihadis, August 18, 2013.

20 Personal interview, Hasan Abu Hanieh, expert on Islamic groups, August 13, 2013.

21 “Teenage Jordanian ‘Jihadist’ Killed in Syria,” *Jordan Times*, February 28, 2013.

22 Hassan Tammimi, “Jordanian Salafi from Rusaifa

Iraq, Turkey, Europe, Chechnya and elsewhere.³⁹

The Militant Group of Choice: Jabhat al-Nusra

The vast majority of Jordanian jihadists in Syria appear to be fighting for Jabhat al-Nusra, according to al-Shalabi.⁴⁰ Reports of their participation were also revealed in an article by *al-Monitor*, translated from *al-Hayat*, stating that the Salafist community in Jordan serves as a lifeline for Jabhat al-Nusra in southern Syria.⁴¹ The report said that jihadists in Syria “rely on gangs that smuggle weapons and people into hot fighting zones in exchange for amounts ranging from \$600 to \$900 per person, in addition to the fees imposed on weapons, which exceed \$400 per gun.”⁴²

The report also said that Jordanian jihadists—who have experience in conflicts such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya and Yemen—lead prominent military brigades in Jabhat al-Nusra. Two Jordanians of Palestinian origin who hail from the city of Zarqa, the hometown of Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, helped establish the Nusra Shura council with Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the head of Jabhat al-Nusra.⁴³ These two militants—Iyad Toubasi and Mustafa Abdul Latif—were among the senior leadership of al-Qa`ida in Iraq.⁴⁴ They were active in Syria since the beginning of the war and immediately started operating without publicizing their presence.⁴⁵

Iyad Toubasi, also known as Abu Gelebebe, is married to Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi's sister.⁴⁶ He fought with al-Zarqawi in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁴⁷ Abu

Gelebebe was the *amir* of Jabhat al-Nusra in Damascus and Derra, although he was thought to have died in December 2012.⁴⁸ Yet subsequent reports suggest he was only injured, and returned to the fighting after receiving medical treatment in Turkey.⁴⁹

After Abu Gelebebe's injury, Mustafa Abdul Latif, another Jordanian, reportedly took charge of the southern front in Jabhat al-Nusra.⁵⁰ Latif, also known as Abu Anas al-Sahaba, was close to al-Zarqawi and fought in the Islamic State of Iraq; he was in charge of a services office for jihadists arriving in Syria to fight in Iraq.⁵¹ Al-Sahaba has been operating in Syria since the beginning of the revolution, and he has played a significant role in recruiting and attracting fighters to Jabhat al-Nusra.⁵²

Conclusion

The war in Syria has drawn jihadists from all over the world, including from Jordan. The rise of Jabhat al-Nusra and its appeal among Jordanian jihadists will likely present a challenge for Jordanian authorities, especially if al-Qa`ida and its allies continue to expand their presence in Syria.

The Jordanian jihadist al-Shalabi assured that Jordan is not a target for militants. Jihadists, he said, will only target a regime if it attacks its own people.⁵³ Nevertheless, there is a heightened sense of anxiety in Jordan over jihadist groups, and the Jordanian authorities have arrested dozens of suspected militants, including key figures in the Salafist movement.⁵⁴

Jordanian Salafi-jihadi sympathizers appear to be growing, or at least becoming more vocal, and the movement seems to be gaining ground in Maan and Zarqa.⁵⁵ Jihadist black flags have been spotted in Maan where citizens increasingly complain of being marginalized by the Jordanian government.⁵⁶ There are also frustrations with the lack of genuine political reforms, soaring poverty and unemployment.⁵⁷

Contrary to some claims that al-Qa`ida's influence has been weakened by the Arab Spring, Hanieh, the expert on Islamic groups in Jordan, argued that there is evidence that al-Qa`ida has benefited from the lack of successful transition toward democracy in some countries.⁵⁸ The military coup that overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood-led government in Egypt has only helped to bolster al-Qa`ida's narrative. As a recent report from *al-Monitor* warned, “As the influence of the Brotherhood recedes, especially after recent events in Egypt, the role of Salafist jihadists will increase in the region. Jordan will soon find itself in the epicenter of this emerging phenomenon.”⁵⁹

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39 Personal interview, Hasan Abu Hanieh, expert on Islamic groups, August 13, 2013.

40 Personal interview, Mohammed al-Shalabi, a Jordanian Salafi-jihadi leader, August 9, 2013; Lyon and al-Khalidi.

41 Al-Samadi.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid. Personal interview, Hasan Abu Hanieh, expert on Islamic groups, August 13, 2013; personal interview, Marwan Shehadeh, expert on Islamic groups, August 12, 2013.

44 Personal interview, Hasan Abu Hanieh, expert on Islamic groups, August 13, 2013.

45 Ibid.

46 Al-Samadi.

47 Ibid. Personal interview, Marwan Shehadeh, expert on Islamic groups, August 12, 2013.

48 Al-Samadi.

49 Ibid. Personal interview, Hasan Abu Hanieh, expert on Islamic groups, August 13, 2013; personal interview, Marwan Shehadeh, expert on Islamic groups, August 12, 2013.

50 Al-Samadi.

51 Personal interview, Marwan Shehadeh, expert on Islamic groups, August 12, 2013.

52 Ibid.

53 Personal interview, Mohammed al-Shalabi, a Jordanian Salafi-jihadi leader, August 9, 2013.

54 Personal interview, Musa Abdullat, legal representative and defense attorney for Salafi-jihadis, August 18, 2013.

55 Al-Sharif; Suha Philip Ma'ayeh, “Resentment Rises Towards Jordan's Leaders in Poverty-hit South,” *The National*, January 21, 2013.

56 Personal observations, Maan, December 2012; Ma'ayeh, “Resentment Rises Towards Jordan's Leaders in Poverty-hit South.”

57 Sean L. Yom, “Jordan in the Balance: Evaluating Regime Stability,” *CTC Sentinel* 6:1 (2013).

58 Personal interview, Hasan Abu Hanieh, expert on Islamic groups, August 13, 2013.

59 Al-Sharif.

The Islamic Movement and Iranian Intelligence Activities in Nigeria

By Jacob Zenn

SINCE THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION in 1979, Iran has promoted “Khomeinism”¹ as one of its foreign policy tools in the Muslim world. Despite Nigeria’s geographic and cultural distance from Iran, there is no region outside of the Middle East where Iran’s ideology has a greater impact than in northern Nigeria. Nigeria’s pro-Iranian Shi’a Muslim community was virtually non-existent 30 years ago but now comprises about five percent of Nigeria’s 80 million Muslims.²

1 According to one scholar’s definition, Khomeinism is “a form of Third World political populism—a radical but pragmatic middle-class movement that strives to enter, rather than reject, the modern age...a militant, sometimes contradictory, political ideology that focuses not on issues of scripture and theology but on the immediate political, social, and economic grievances of workers and the middle class...[Khomeini] has systematically manipulated history to bolster the clergy’s reputation as champions of the downtrodden and as defenders against foreign powers.” Although Khomeinism is often associated with Shi’ism and support for Iran, it has also been accepted without a Shi’a or Iranian connotation. For example, Sunni Syrians in the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s looked up to Khomeini until he made the “irreparable mistake” of supporting Syrian leader Hafiz al-Assad even after al-Assad’s crackdown on the Syrian rebellion in 1982. Similarly, those who embrace the Islamic Movement in Nigeria’s brand of Khomeinism need not be Shi’a or Iranian, since the doctrine is intended to transcend sect and nationality. Khomeini said in 1980, “We do not worship Iran, we worship Allah; for patriotism is another name for paganism. I say let this land [Iran] burn. I say let this land go up in smoke, provided Islam emerges triumphant in the rest of the world.” Since Khomeini’s death in 1989, however, his successors have tried to “rebrand Khomeini as an iconic patriot” to “strengthen the image of the Islamic Republic.” See Rasmus Christian Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity After Khomeini* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Umar Abdullah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria* (Berkeley, CA: Mizan Press, 1983); Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

2 Reuters reported in 2008 that “Shi’a Islam was almost unknown in Nigeria until the early 1980s when Muslim radical Ibrahim Zakzaky, fired by the Iranian revolution, campaigned for an Islamic government and stricter adherence to Sharia, or Islamic law.” The IMN estimates its followers (it does not have formal “membership”) at three million, while other estimates range from one million to

In recent years, Iran’s Quds Force³ and Lebanese Hizb Allah have coordinated intelligence gathering on U.S. and Israeli targets in Nigeria and engaged in weapons and drug trafficking in West Africa with operatives drawn from Nigeria’s Shi’a community. The Iranian government also maintains ties with an influential religious group called the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN). The rhetoric and actions of the IMN’s leading imams and former members add fuel to the hot mix of Islamic fundamentalist movements that emerged in northern Nigeria after the 1970s.

This article analyzes the activities of the IMN, the Quds Force, and Hizb Allah in Nigeria and West Africa. It finds that the Zaria, Kaduna-based IMN’s charismatic leadership and northern Nigeria’s attraction to revivalist Islam enables Iran to spread “Khomeinism” in Nigeria, including its antagonism towards the United States and the West.⁴ Kaduna, which is the political center of northern Nigeria, has experienced increased Muslim-Christian violence, unemployment, and anti-Western sentiment since Nigeria restored democracy in 1999 and 12 northern states adopted modified versions of Shari’a (Islamic law).⁵

four million or more. Nigerian Shi’a who are not members of the IMN may be unaffiliated with any movement or members of the Rasulul A’azam Foundation (RAAF). RAAF is led by Shaykh Muhammad Nura Dass and is strongest in Gombe and Bauchi. RAAF, which split from the IMN in 1992, rejects IMN’s confrontational attitude toward the government, argues that the Nigerian secular state is legitimate and must be obeyed, and focuses on Shi’a doctrine and ritual. In contrast to the IMN, whose inspiration comes from Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini, RAAF is similar to Iraq’s leading Shi’a cleric, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who believes politicians should run economic affairs, day-to-day politics and foreign relations, while the clerics should limit themselves to spiritual and religious matters in which the politicians cannot pass sound judgment. See Farouk Umar and Estelle Shirbon, “Tensions Between Muslims Simmer in Nigerian City,” Reuters, March 19, 2008.

3 The Quds Force is a special unit of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) that is tasked with “extra-territorial operations.”

4 Muhammad Sani Umar, “Education and Islamic Trends in Northern Nigeria: 1970s to 1990s,” *Africa Today* 48:2 (2001); Ahmad Dallal, “The Origins and Objectives of Islamic Revivalist Thought, 1750-1850,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113:3 (1993).

5 Although Nigeria has been under civilian rule and held democratic elections since 1999, many scholars

The IMN exploits this extremist-prone environment to extend its message to Shi’a and Sunnis, including members who joined movements such as Boko Haram.⁶

Radicalization in Northern Nigeria: Iran and the IMN

Iran’s main advocate in Nigeria is the IMN’s leader, Ibrahim al-Zakzaky. Al-Zakzaky graduated from Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Kaduna in the 1970s, where he led the Muslim Students’ Society and then Nigeria’s Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s.⁷ During the Cold War period, al-

question whether Nigeria is a “democracy” or a “selectocracy,” “petrocacy,” or “kleptocracy.” The ineffectiveness and corruption of Nigerian democracy are reasons why the IMN and other Islamist movements, such as Boko Haram, have opposed democracy. In a September 25, 2013, video statement, for example, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau said, “The concept of government of the people, by the people, for the people cannot continue to exist. It shall soon, very soon, be replaced by Government of Allah, by Allah, for Allah.” See Godwin Etakibuebu, “This Nigerian Democracy is Really Going Crazy,” *Vanguard*, September 24, 2013; Prince Osuagwu and Vincent Ujummadu, “What We Practice in Nigeria is Selectocracy – Prof Mojekwu,” *Vanguard*, March 29, 2011; Tina Rosenberg, “The Perils of Petrocracy,” *New York Times*, November 4, 2007; Ekanem Ekop, “Kleptocracy as Nigeria’s Albatross,” *Nigerian Tribune*, July 3, 2013; “Boko Haram’s Shekau Appears in Video After Death Claims,” *Vanguard*, September 25, 2013; Tom Ashby, “Christians Say Islamic Extremism on Rise in Nigeria,” Reuters, April 17, 2004.

6 The Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab is, for example, a likely byproduct of this extremism-prone environment. He attended anti-American sermons in mosques in Kaduna years before he trained with al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to detonate explosives on a Detroit-bound plane on Christmas Day 2009. His neighbor in Kaduna said, “For 30 years, there has been violence here. People like Farouk grew up in this atmosphere. I don’t think all his radical ideas came from Yemen.” The Boko Haram breakaway faction, Ansaru, which was closely connected to affiliates of al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), also formed its first *shura* council in Zaria, Kaduna, in 2011. See “Arrests Follow Kaduna Clashes,” BBC, November 5, 2001; Adam Nossiter, “Lonely Trek to Radicalism for Terror Suspect,” *New York Times*, January 16, 2010.

7 Nigeria’s Ikhwan al-Muslimin (Muslim Brotherhood) was an offshoot of the Muslim Students’ Society and a Nigerian version of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood. According to its website, “The Muslim Students’ Society of Nigeria (MSSN) was founded in Lagos, Nigeria on 18th April, 1954, in response to the yearnings of Muslim students for a platform to discuss and find solutions to their common problems and challenges, especially in the face of hostile

Zakzaky was known for preaching Islam as an alternative model to socialism and capitalism and leading rallies where followers burned Nigeria's constitution to protest secularism and supported Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979.⁸ After traveling to Iran in 1980, al-Zakzaky adopted the symbolism and rhetoric of Shi'a Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini on top of the ideology of the late Sunni Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood founder, Hasan al-Banna, and Muslim Brotherhood thought leader, Sayyid Qutb.⁹ Al-Zakzaky then founded the IMN and went on "recruitment tours" to northern Nigerian universities to showcase the Iranian revolution.¹⁰ In between periods of imprisonment in the mid-1980s, al-Zakzaky converted to Shi'a Islam and transformed the IMN from student activism to a mass movement that called for "a second jihad" to implement Shari'a in Nigeria.¹¹ He also declared Nigeria's secular government unfit to rule and the traditional Sunni leadership of Nigeria, including the sultan of Sokoto and Sufi brotherhoods, guilty of siding with the government to "protect their offices and worldly possessions."¹² Al-Zakzaky, however,

colonial and evangelical environment then prevalent in the country."

8 Ibrahim Usman, "Zakzaky - Ahmadu Bello University's Last Alumnus Standing," *Daily Trust*, December 5, 2012; Muhammad Dahiru Sulaiman, "Shiaism and the Islamic Movement in Nigeria 1979-1991," in Ousmane Kane and Jean-Louis Triaud eds., *Islam et Islamismes au sud du Sahara* (Paris: Karthala, 1998).

9 Al-Zakzaky said, "The Islamic Awakening started when Allah blessed this Ummah with people like Shaykh Hasan al-Bana, Maududi, Sayyid Qutb and Imam Khomeini...But above all, the last two made the greatest impact. Sayyid Qutb made his impact ideologically, for he was executed by the tyrants before he could realize his theory. As for Imam Khomeini, he is a unique personality in the history of mankind...This is partly because the Islamic revolution in Iran came at a time when all hopes were almost lost." See "The Islamic Awakening: Islamic Struggle, Correct Path to Lasting Success," Islamicmovement.org, undated.

10 Alexander Thurston, "Interactions Between Northern Nigeria and the Arab World in the Twentieth Century," Georgetown University Masters Thesis, 2009.

11 Roman Loimeier, *Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), p. 299.

12 Dauda Nalado, "Islamic Authority Would be Established in Nigeria," Islamicmovement.org, September 22, 2010; Karl Maier, *This House Has Fallen* (London: Penguin Books, 2000).

downplayed the IMN's "Shi'a" image, choosing instead to portray it as an "Islamic movement."¹³

Today, the IMN, which is commonly known in Nigeria as "the Shi'a" (despite al-Zakzaky's attempts to portray it as non-sectarian), is Africa's largest Shi'a movement.¹⁴ It has reportedly mobilized more than one million people for Shi'a religious events and 50,000 people for political rallies where Khomeini and his successor, Ali Khamenei, and Hizb Allah leader Hassan Nasrallah are revered, while flags of the "Great Satan [the United States]"¹⁵ and Israel are burned.¹⁶ The IMN also has hundreds of paramilitary guards called *hurras*,¹⁷ a Hausa language¹⁸ newspaper that honors IMN "martyrs," a Hausa radio

13 Ayatollah Khomeini also "downplayed" the Iranian Revolution's "Shi'a" image. According to Vali Nasr, "[Khomeini] posed as a champion of Islamic revival, and presented the Iranian revolution as the Islamic revolution that the Sunni thinkers of the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e Islami had been claiming was necessary if Islam's fortunes were to be restored... His anti-Americanism had roots in Iranian history but was in many regards a byproduct of his ambition to be recognized as the leader of all Muslims, to find a cause that would unite Shias and Sunnis under his cloak." See Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), pp. 136-138.

14 The term for "Shi'a" in Hausa is "Yan Shi'a."

15 The term "Great Satan" is a derogatory epithet for the United States that was first used by Ayatollah Khomeini in a speech on November 5, 1979. Al-Zakzaky also uses the term to refer to the United States.

16 The IMN leader in Yobe, Mustapha Lawan Nasidi, estimated that the February 20, 2011, Mawlid celebration in Zaria had two million youths in attendance, while other witnesses observed that Nasidi may have exaggerated the number, but there was still a continuous line of youths for two kilometers along roads leading to the main square. See Samuel Aruwan, "Anti-Islam Film: 50,000 Shiites Protest in Zaria," *Blueprinting*, September 21, 2012.

17 According to the IMN's website, "The Guards or *hurras* is a wing in the movement responsible for ensuring proper arrangement, providing security to the members of the movement during normal activities and events that are being carried out at different times." One analyst who has researched the IMN extensively told this author that "the *hurras* are not officially armed yet. They do not display arms because this would certainly compel security forces to confront them, but they are a uniformed, regimented organization modeled on the Revolutionary Guard that carries Hizb Allah's flag as their emblem."

18 Hausa is the *lingua franca* in northern Nigeria and seen as a language of the masses, as opposed to English, which is the language of the elite.

station called Shuhada (the martyrs), an al-Zakzaky Facebook page, and an IMN website with faces of Khomeini, Khamenei and al-Zakzaky on every page.¹⁹ As in previous years, al-Zakzaky visited Iranian centers of Shi'a scholarship in Qom and Mashhad in 2012 and met dozens of IMN members studying in Iran.²⁰ He also visited Lebanon, where he received a red flag from Karbala, Iraq's Shi'a shrine of Imam Husayn, as a gift from Nasrallah, and Iraq, where he prayed at Najaf's Shi'a shrine of Imam Ali.²¹

Although a former Iranian diplomat described the IMN as an "Iranian proxy,"²² the IMN claims it only receives "simple handouts" from its members.²³ Nonetheless, evidence shows the IMN largely serves as an extension of Iranian foreign policy in Nigeria, especially in spreading "Khomeinism" among the country's Muslims.

Gateway to Radicalism

Although the IMN does not promote violence, its imams preach that the West conspires to "dominate minds and resources" of Muslims by converting them to Christianity and secularizing them, Jews are the "lowest creatures on earth" and the "children of monkeys and pigs,"²⁴ the West fabricated the 9/11 attacks on the United States, and the Nigerian government created Boko Haram to justify Western-Christian "occupation" of the Muslim world and northern Nigeria.²⁵ This rhetoric appeals to broad sectors of Nigeria's Muslim population, including Sunnis. For example, at more than 10 IMN-led protests over the U.S.-made film

19 For al-Zakzaky's Facebook page, see www.facebook.com/sayyidzakzaky. For the IMN's website, see www.islamicmovement.org.

20 For al-Zakzaky's visit to Iran, see www.islamicmovement.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=298:pictures-of-sheikh-zakzakys-visit-to-some-places-inside-iran&catid=41:frontpage.

21 Photos of al-Zakzaky's visits to Lebanon and Iraq are available at www.islamicmovement.org.

22 Dan Brett, "Profile of an African Hezbollah," Middle East Strategic Information, January 25, 2009.

23 "Re-Insecurity: The Middle East Factor," Islamicmovement.org, June 20, 2013.

24 "Highlight of Sheikh Zakzaky's Speech," July 1, 2008, available at www.sharqeyah.us/vb/showthread.php?p=238378&langid=1.

25 Agaju Madbuga, "Boko Haram Creation of the West - Zakzaky," *Daily Champion*, September 6, 2011.

Innocence of Muslims in August 2012, most participants were neither IMN members nor Shi'a and never saw the film, but were persuaded by the IMN's message.²⁶ Boko Haram also capitalized on the upsurge in anti-American sentiment by issuing a widely viewed YouTube video in which its leader, Abubakar Shekau, promised retaliation against "evil plotters of the blasphemous film."²⁷

The IMN's rhetoric has in some cases translated into violence. In 1991, an IMN imam in Katsina (who also spoke at film protests in 2012), Yakubu Yahaya, whose hero was Khomeini, led hundreds of IMN members in an attack on the office of the *Daily Times* newspaper after it portrayed the Prophet Muhammad in a cartoon marrying a prostitute.²⁸ In the 2000s, the IMN clashed most frequently with Sunnis in Sokoto, which is the seat of the sultan of Sokoto and where Nigerian intelligence reported that IMN established training camps for recruits from across northern Nigeria.²⁹ In 2005, IMN imams sought leadership positions in mosques in Sokoto, which led to violence between Sunni and Shi'a.³⁰ In 2007, Nigerian security forces destroyed the IMN's headquarters in Sokoto and arrested an IMN imam after a Sunni cleric was assassinated at a mosque

allegedly by the IMN in revenge for the cleric's support of the crackdown on the IMN in 2005.³¹ Al-Zakzaky, however, claimed the IMN was framed to justify ousting the IMN from Sokoto.³² In 2012, al-Zakzaky again accused Nigerian security forces of a plot to assassinate the IMN's imam in Yobe, Mustapha Lawan Nasidi, while Nasidi was leading prayers, but the attack failed insofar as it killed Nasidi's brother, driver, and two people seated near him.³³ When Israeli Foreign Affairs Minister Avigdor Lieberman visited Abuja in 2009, al-Zakzaky said that Nigerian security forces targeted the IMN for Israel because "Iran is waxing stronger in Nigeria through me, and this is why they want to attack us, to finally slay the growing Iranian influence and our movement."³⁴

In several cases, IMN members have been radicalized in the movement but then formed or joined more violent groups.³⁵ One example was when a mob of former IMN members turned Salafi-jihadists publicly beheaded a Christian Igbo trader in Kano in 1994 for allegedly desecrating the Qur'an.³⁶ According to a prominent Zaria-based Salafist imam and Nigerian scholars, Boko Haram founder Muhammad Yusuf also met and followed al-Zakzaky before Yusuf became Borno State *amir* of Jama'at al-Tajdid al-Islami (Movement

for the Revival of Islam, JTI).³⁷ JTI was a Kano-based IMN breakaway group founded in 1994 that continued al-Zakzaky's confrontational stance toward the government but through Salafist doctrine and whose members reportedly carried out the beheading of the Christian trader in Kano.³⁸ In 2002, Yusuf founded Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama'a (Companions of the Prophet), which was known locally as the "Nigerian Taliban" or "Yusufiya" (Followers of Yusuf), and became the Borno representative on the Supreme Council for Shari'a in Nigeria.³⁹ In July 2009, the Nigerian security forces killed Yusuf and 1,000 of his followers,

37 It is certain that Yusuf, who was a native of Yobe State and acquired religious prominence in Yobe and Borno, would have come into contact with IMN leaders in Yobe. IMN has a well-established presence in Potiskum, Yobe's capital, where Mustapha Lawan Nasidi is the leading IMN imam. In one of Yusuf's sermons from 2009, he also said, "Muslims are very divided, some fight as Shi'a, others as Sufi and others as a mixture of everything... We had Sunni groups that started as Muslim Brothers, but ended up turning into a Shi'a sect. Another group also emerged called Jama'atu Izalatul Bid'a wa Ikamatu Sunna, but they all ended up working with the government. In fact some of their members embraced democracy and even became chairmen and councilors of local government areas. This indeed is no religion at all." Terje Østebø also wrote that Yusuf was "a self-educated activist, inspired by the Islamist Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria (MSSN), formed in 1954, and in particular Ibrahim al-Zakzaki." See Terje Østebø, "Islamic Militancy in Africa," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, November 2012; Abimbola Adesoji, "The Boko Haram Uprising and Islamic Revivalism in Nigeria," *Africa Spectrum*, 2010; "Who Are the Boko Harams, Part I," najainfoman.wordpress.com, June 24, 2012; "Shekh Albani Speaks On Boko Haram," *Sunday Trust*, January 1, 2012; Ousmane Kane, *Muslim Modernity in Postcolonial Nigeria* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

38 Tahir Haliru Gwoza, "Activities of Islamic Civic Associations in the Northwest of Nigeria: With Particular Reference to Kano State," *Africa Spectrum*, 2003; Mark Bray, *Universal Primary Education in Nigeria: A Study of Kano State* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

39 Yusuf also reportedly belonged to the Izala movement for a period of time in the 2000s until he broke away from Izala because he believed the movement became too close to the Nigerian government and "tolerant of other Islamic tendencies." See Nosa James-Igbinador, "Why We Must Fight And Win This War Against The Zealots," Sahara Reporters, October 8, 2013; Bestman Wellington, "Nigeria and the Threat of al-Qaeda Terrorism," *Terrorism Monitor* 6:12 (2008); Bayo Oladeji et al., "Boko Haram Picks Datti Ahmed as Mediator," *Leadership*, March 14, 2012.

26 These reports come from eyewitnesses to the protests. See Muhammad Nur Alkali, Abubakar Kawu Monguno, and Ballama Shettima Mustafa, "Overview Of Islamic Actors in Northeastern Nigeria," University of Oxford, January 2012.

27 Aminu Abubakar, "Boko Haram Chief Issues Video Threat Over Anti-Islam Film," Agence France-Presse, October 1, 2012.

28 Twenty-one years later, in 2012, *This Day* media houses in Abuja and Kano were attacked by suicide bombers connected to Boko Haram in revenge for portraying the Prophet Muhammad satirically in a cartoon that it published in 2001. See Loimeier, *Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria*, p. 300; Toyin Falola, *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics & Secular Ideologies* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1998).

29 Segun Olatunji, "Arms Stockpiling: Kaduna Police Boss, Islamic Sect on War Path," *Punch*, March 19, 2009.

30 Sunnis alleged that Shi'a were disrespecting the sultan of Sokoto and that al-Zakzaky was fueling the crisis for personal gain, while Shi'a alleged the sultan was behind the attacks on Shi'a and that Sunnis started the conflict by violently breaking up a Shi'a Ashura procession. See Musa Umar Kauzare and Aminu Mohammed, "Sokoto Sectarian Clash: Matters Arising," *Daily Trust*, June 17, 2005.

31 "Nigerian Clash Over Cleric Death," BBC, July 19, 2007.

32 Ibid.

33 Nasidi gained popularity in 2006 when he led the protests against the Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad in a satirical way. See "Yan Uwa Uku Ne Suka Yi Shahada Sakamakon Harin Da Sojoji Suka Kai Markaz a Potiskum," Harkar Musulunci, May 29, 2012, available at www.harkarmusulunci.org/data.asp?id=102535&lang=1.

34 Ibraheem Musa and Isa Liman, "Police Set to Sack Shiites," *Daily Trust*, September 11, 2009.

35 Umar and Shirbon.

36 Etanibi Alemika and Festus Okoye, "Ethno-Religious Conflicts and Democracy in Nigeria: Challenges. Kaduna, Nigeria," Human Rights Monitor, 2002; Adamolekun Taiye, "Religious Fanaticism and Fundamentalism in Nigeria Since 1980: A Historical Perspective," *British Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 9:2 (2012); Karl Maier, "Beheading Stirs Nigerian Tension," *Independent*, August 16, 1995; Jamal, "Did Gideon Akaluka Really Desecrate The Holy Qur'an? A Contrarian Muslim Review," Nairaland, April 26, 2011; Tajudeen Suleiman, "The Plot to Islamise Nigeria," *Tell*, November 30, 1990.

who were by then known as “Boko Haram” because of the radical teachings of Yusuf and his deputy, Abubakar Shekau (“Boko Haram” means “Western education is sinful” in Hausa). In July 2010, Shekau announced that he succeeded Yusuf, and he formed the Salafi-jihadi group Jama`at Ahl al-Sunna li al-Da`wa wa al-Jihad (Sunni Group for Preaching and Jihad), which has continued to be known as “Boko Haram” since it began waging an armed insurgency in September 2010.

Yusuf and Sunni leaders of JTI and the more popular Izala movement⁴⁰ that subsumed JTI in 1999 likely split from the IMN because of three main reasons: first, they started to believe al-Zakzaky was “smuggling a Shi`a agenda” into the purported “Islamic Movement”; second, the war between Shi`a Iran and Saudi Arabia-backed and Sunni-led Iraq from 1980 to 1988 polarized Shi`a and Sunnis throughout the Muslim world⁴¹; and, third, Nigerian Sunni leaders, including Yusuf, began receiving funds from Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Sudan, to promote Sunni Islam and Salafism to counter Iran’s influence.⁴² Nonetheless, Boko Haram and IMN still share similar doctrines, including: demonizing the

United States and its allies; comparing their conflict against the Nigerian government to conflicts between the United States and Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan; viewing the secular state as “illegitimate”; blaming the “corrupt” government for poverty of the masses while proposing an Islamic system as the solution; claiming Usman dan Fodio’s legacy (while condemning Dan Fodio’s heirs, such as the sultan of Sokoto)⁴³; exploiting sensitive issues to Muslims; and targeting northern Nigeria’s unemployed youths for membership.

Unlike the IMN and virtually all Nigerian Salafist movements, however, only Boko Haram prohibits Western education, service in the government, female membership, and looks to the Taliban and al-Qa`ida (particularly al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb and al-Qa`ida in Iraq) for inspiration in carrying out violent jihad, including assassinating Salafist imams who preach non-violence and Christians—although Boko Haram has never targeted Shi`a.⁴⁴ It is therefore

43 Usman dan Fodio was a pre-colonial West African Islamic leader. For more details, see Philip D. Curtin, “Jihad in West Africa: Early Phases and Inter-Relations in Mauritania and Senegal,” *Journal of African History* 12:1 (1971).

44 As an example of al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb and Algerian jihadists’ influence on Yusuf, in an undated Hausa sermon called “Tahirin Musilminai” (History of Muslims), Yusuf said, “We are yet to establish a pure Sunni Islamic sect that will be ready to take on ignorance and secularism. The few we have and are functioning are al-Qa`ida and the Taliban whose ideology and theological foundations are purely Sunni in nature. Finally, we have other groups emerging in Algeria, all of them have missions committed to the spread of Islam and I hope you understand all these.” This video is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUQYNucjqUE. In an April 2009 sermon called “Guzurin Mujaahidai” (Foundations of Jihad), Yusuf also said, “In Algeria, they tried to introduce democracy but when they realized democracy was anti-Islam and anti-Allah, they came back to the way of Shari`a. They formed the Islamic Jihad group that was initially made up of more than 50,000 people. But since the group refused to follow the way of Shari`a, the way of Allah, their numbers declined drastically.” This video is available at www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=VWCNdqWGU-M#t=2690. According to prominent imam Muhammad Auwal al-Bani of Zaria, “Yusuf had listened to some leaders of the Algerian Islamist insurgency pronounce a *fatwa* that prohibited the militants to attend schools and to work for the government. Besides having been rejected by the vast majority

believable that a former Boko Haram member interviewed in August 2013 claimed he was a member of an “Islamic movement” called “the Shi`a” that sent members to Iran for training before he joined a Boko Haram faction in Kaduna that attacked Christians and security forces.⁴⁵

The Quds Force and Hizb Allah: Recent Operations

Iran’s Quds Force and Hizb Allah’s global operations have involved Nigeria for more than a decade, but their activities were exposed in October 2010. Nigerian customs officials in Lagos seized 13 containers of weapons from a ship operated by the same French-Lebanese businessman’s company that in March 2011 saw a ship bound for Sinai, Egypt, via Syria to supply weapons to Hamas in Gaza intercepted by Israeli naval commandos.⁴⁶ The containers in Lagos, which included 107mm Katyusha artillery rockets used by Hizb Allah against Israel in 2006, were shipped on behalf of a Tehran-based Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) “front company” and were picked up at Bandar Abbas in Iran, where the IRGC has a naval base.⁴⁷ According to Nigeria’s foreign minister, the weapons were destined for a warehouse in Abuja, but shippers altered documents to send them to Gambia (presumably for anti-

of Algerian scholars, the *fatwa* was rooted in the specific experience of the Algerian civil war of the 1990s between the military government and armed Islamist cells operating from the mountains. Yusuf blindly absorbed it and applied it to a different context like Nigeria.” Boko Haram members also trained in Algeria during the mid-2000s, including those who later planned the suicide attack on the UN Headquarters in Abuja on August 26, 2011, and those who broke from Boko Haram to form Ansaru. Abubakar Shekau has frequently referred to al-Qa`ida in Iraq leaders Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi and Umar al-Baghdadi, and he has employed *tafkiri* (accusing other Muslims of apostasy) ideology to justify Boko Haram’s attacks. See Andrea Brigaglia, “Ja`far Mahmoud Adam, Mohammed Yusuf and Al-Muntada Islamic Trust: Reflections on the Genesis of the Boko Haram Phenomenon in Nigeria,” *Annual Review of Islam in Africa* 11 (2012).

45 “Confessions of Boko Haram Fugitive,” *Sun News Online*, August 10, 2013.

46 Nick Tattersall, “Weapons Seized in Nigeria Came from Iran: Shipping Company,” Reuters, October 30, 2010.

47 Yemi Adebawale, “Illegal Weapons Loaded in Iran,” *This Day*, October 29, 2010.

40 Jama`at Izalat al-Bid`a wa Iqamat al-Sunna (Society of Removal of Innovation and Reestablishment of the Sunna), known as Izala, was founded in 1978 by Shaykh Ismaila Idris in Jos, Plateau State. The movement is anti-Sufi and fights *bid`a*, or innovation, that it believes is practiced by Sufi Brotherhoods, including the ritual of visiting the tombs of Islamic saints. Izala is now one of the largest Islamic movements not only in Nigeria, but also in West African countries such as Niger and Chad. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are known to fund the building of Izala mosques in the region, although Izala is generally more progressive than those countries in terms of women’s education and other social issues.

41 Saudi Arabia reportedly provided Iraq with \$1 billion per month starting in 1982. See John Bulloch and Harvey Morris, *The Gulf War: Its Origins, History and Consequences* (London: Heinemann Ltd., 1991).

42 John Paden, *Faith and Politics in Nigeria: Nigeria as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2008); “Nigeria: Investigating Wahhabi Insurrection and Saudi Funds,” IRIN, January 25, 2004; “Sudanese Arrested, Accused of Funding December Islamic Uprising,” IRIN, February 20, 2004; Roman Loimeier, “Playing with Affiliations: Muslims in Northern Nigeria in the 20th Century,” in Laurent Fourchard, Andre Mary and Rene Otaeyek eds., *Entreprises religieuses transnationales en Afrique de l’Ouest* (Paris: Karthala, 2005).

Senegalese rebels in Casamance).⁴⁸ Nigerian security officials arrested four individuals: a senior Quds Force officer; a Nigerian who formerly studied in Iran and worked at Radio Tehran's Hausa language service; and two Nigerian customs officials.⁴⁹ A fifth Iranian suspect, Sayyed Akbar Tabatabaei, who was the Quds Force

“Iran’s Quds Force and Hizb Allah’s global operations have involved Nigeria for more than a decade, but their activities were exposed in October 2010.”

Africa Corps commander, took refuge in the Iranian Embassy, flew back to Tehran with Iran's foreign minister and was reportedly reassigned to Venezuela to run Quds Force operations in Latin America.⁵⁰ One month after these arrests, \$10 million worth of heroin hidden in auto engine parts suspected of being linked to the weapons shipment in October was seized in Lagos from a ship originating in Iran.⁵¹

Iran's role in weapons trafficking resurfaced in May 2013 when Nigerian security forces uncovered a weapons “armory” in a Kano home owned by the Lebanese consul to Sierra Leone.⁵²

The security forces arrested three individuals, all of whom admitted to receiving training from Hizb Allah, including: a Lebanese citizen, who owned a supermarket and amusement park in Abuja; a second Lebanese citizen, who was arrested at the airport in Kano before boarding a flight to Lebanon; and a dual Lebanese-Nigerian citizen.⁵³ Although the weapons were rusted, Nigeria's director of the State Security Service said they were “serviceable,” and a Nigerian brigadier general said they were intended for attacks on U.S. and Israeli targets in Nigeria.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, some of the munitions, such as anti-tank mines, are more compatible with rebel groups than a terrorist group and may have been linked to the weapons and heroin shipments in Lagos in 2010.⁵⁵

In February 2013, three months before uncovering the “armory,” Nigeria announced it also uncovered an Iranian-funded cell whose leader admitted to plotting attacks on “prominent Nigerians” to “unsettle the West.”⁵⁶ Such leaders included Nigeria's former military leader, Ibrahim Babangida, and former sultan of Sokoto, Ibrahim Dasuki, as well as Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Nigeria.⁵⁷ The cell also conducted surveillance on USAID, the Peace Corps, an Israeli shipping company, a Jewish cultural center, and hotels frequented by Americans and Israelis in Lagos.⁵⁸ The cell's leader, a

Shi'a imam in Ilorin, attended a course at Imam Khomeini University in Qom in 2006.⁵⁹ In 2011, he trained in the use of AK-47 rifles and improvised explosive devices in Iran, and in 2012 he traveled to Dubai to receive funding to form the cell.⁶⁰

Regional Comparison

Iran's activities in Nigeria are consistent with Iran's actions throughout Africa. For example, in Kenya, two members of the Quds Force were found guilty in May 2013 of storing explosives and carrying out surveillance of Israeli, British, U.S. and Saudi targets in Kenya.⁶¹ The Nigeria and Kenya plots fit the pattern of Quds Force and Hizb Allah operations involving Iranians and dual Lebanese-European or Lebanese-Canadian nationals that targeted Israelis in India, Georgia and Thailand in February 2012; Azerbaijan in March 2012; and Cyprus and Bulgaria in July 2012.⁶² The failures of all but the Bulgaria cell, as well as the ability of Israeli intelligence to help national governments track these cells, may have prompted Iran to search for new targets in Africa in 2013, such as Kenya and Nigeria, where Israelis often travel and conduct business.

While Iran has increased economic activities and aid to Africa in recent years, much of Iran's influence is won through ideology promotion, as seen with the IMN in Nigeria. Iran has, for example, opened up Iranian Cultural Centers (similar to Confucius

48 “Arms Seizure: Nigeria Reports Iran to the UN,” Elombah.com, November 16, 2010.

49 “Arms Shipment: Nigeria Trial Will Expose Iran Gun-running,” *Vanguard*, January 19, 2011.

50 Ibid. Tabatabaei and the other suspects were proscribed by the U.S. Treasury Department for overseeing the shipment to Gambia. See “Treasury Targets Iranian Arms Shipments,” U.S. Treasury Department, March 27, 2012.

51 “Nigeria Seizes \$9.9 mln Heroin Shipment from Iran,” Reuters, November 19, 2013. See also Charles E. Grassley, “Drug Trafficking in West Africa,” Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, May 16, 2012, that stated, “Treasury found complex links between the bank and drug traffickers to the Middle Eastern terrorist organization Hezbollah. Treasury and DEA were able to also link individuals in Iran to this criminal money laundering and drug smuggling network [that moved illegal drugs from South America to Europe and the Middle East via West Africa].”

52 “Suspected ‘Hezbollah Cell’ Armory Uncovered in

Kano City,” *Digital Journal*, June 2, 2013; Abdulsalam Muhammed, “Hezbollah Weapons Warehouse Belongs to Sierra Leonean – Lebanese Consul,” *Vanguard*, June 4, 2013.

53 “Hezbollah Members Arrested In Kano, Illegal Armory Discovered,” Point Blank News, May 30, 2013.

54 Ibid. According to one Nigerian security analyst, the weapons “were immersed in sawdust for concealment. Humidity probably caused the sawdust to become ‘caked’ and stick to the weapons.” Another analyst suggested, “considering how poorly the weapons were stored one could argue that [the suspects] were either not particularly well trained agents or else they have such a vast number of arms caches that these were leftovers.”

55 “Nigerian Army Links Boko Haram To Hezbollah,” Sahara Reporters, May 30, 2012.

56 Austine Odo, “SSS Busts Alleged Iran-Linked ‘Spy Network,’” *Daily Trust*, February 21, 2013.

57 “Suspect Alleges Plot to Kill Saudi Ambassador to Nigeria,” *Vanguard*, August 3, 2013.

58 Bashir Adigun, “Nigeria Secret Police Say Terror Group Broken Up,” Associated Press, February 20, 2013.

59 Success Nwogu, “Court Orders SSS to Release Berende, Terror Suspect,” *Punch*, May 27, 2013.

60 Soni Daniel, “How We Saved Dasuki IBB, From Assassins – DSS,” *Vanguard*, February 21, 2013.

61 Kenyan officials reportedly said, “The advanced explosives the Iranians had and their links to the Quds Force would indicate the mission in Kenya was cleared by the highest levels inside Iran's government.” See Snezana Farberov, “Two Iranians from Elite Revolutionary Guard Unit Arrested in Kenya While Plotting to Attack U.S., Israeli and British Targets,” *Guardian*, July 2, 2012; Tom Odula, “Kenyan Court Sentences 2 Iranians to Life in Jail,” Associated Press, May 6, 2013.

62 Matthew Levitt, “Hizballah and the Qods Force in Iran's Shadow War with the West,” The Washington Institute of Near East Policy, January 2013; “Iranian and Hezbollah Terrorist Attacks against Israeli Targets Abroad The Situation on the Ground and Background Information,” The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, February 15, 2012.

Institutes or Alliance Francaise) in countries such as Sierra Leone and Tanzania, attempted to convert villages from Khartoum to Kordofan in Sudan to Shi'ism, and invited Ivorian and Sudanese Shi'a imams to the Basij base in Ramshir, southwestern Iran.⁶³ Similarly, indigenous African Shi'a (as opposed to Lebanese-West African citizens) in Sierra Leone, Senegal and other countries receive funding to study Shi'ism in Lebanon or Iran and return home sympathizing with "Khomeinism"⁶⁴; the former president of Comoros from 2006 to 2010, for example, was even nicknamed "Ayatollah" because he studied in Qom under Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazidi, the mentor of former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.⁶⁵ As in Nigeria, some African Shi'a have become militants, such as the Ivorian who in July 2013 became the "first African martyr" in Syria defending President Bashar al-Assad's forces and was later eulogized by Hizb Allah.⁶⁶

63 The Basij (Persian: Sazman-e Basij-e Mostaz'afin, literally "The Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed") is a paramilitary volunteer militia established in 1979 by order of Ayatollah Khomeini and has a base in almost every Iranian city. See Ahmed Janabi, "Shia Books Spark Debate in Sudan," al-Jazeera, December 22, 2006; Saidu Kamara, "Sierra Leone: Iranian Cultural Centre to Reopen," *Standard Times*, April 6, 2004.

64 Although Sudan is majority Sunni and has promoted Salafism abroad, the government is allied with Iran and Hizb Allah in opposing Israel and supplying weapons to Hamas in Gaza, so Sudan likely tolerates some of Iran's religious activities in the country. See "Le véritable poids de la communauté chiite au Sénégal," Leral.net, November 11, 2011; Lloyd Ridgeon, *Shi'i Islam and Identity: Religion, Politics and Change in the Global Muslim Community* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012); "Sheikh Harun Bari: Over 1 Million Shias Live in Sierra Leone," Ahlul Bayt News Agency, September 13, 2011.

65 Comoran President Sambi was, however, Sunni, and also studied in Saudi Arabia and Sudan, but some Shi'a believe he is Shi'a and committed *taqiyya* (a method whereby a Muslim—often Shi'a—can legally deny his or her faith or commit blasphemous acts if facing persecution or needing protection from the majority). Comoros is mostly Sunni and therefore Sambi could have hypothetically hid his Shi'a beliefs to win the presidential election. See "Profile: The 'Ayatollah' of Comoros," BBC, May 16, 2006; "Details of Spending Iran's Wealth in Other Countries," CNN, July 23, 2009.

66 "The First African Martyr in Defense of the Shrine," *valieamr.com*, July 26, 2013. Also see www.southlebanon.org/?p=79659.

Conclusion

Iran's activities in Nigeria likely serve two purposes. First, Tehran wants to win the support of African countries and its one billion people to oppose UN and U.S. policies targeting Iran. Iran has achieved some success, with polls showing in 2013 that many African countries, from Senegal to Ghana to Kenya, have "favorable" ratings of Iran two times higher than the world average.⁶⁷ Even after breaking ties with Iran because of the illegal arms shipment in Lagos in 2010 and the Iranian foreign minister's subsequent admission that Iran supplied "substantial amounts" of arms to anti-Senegalese rebels, Senegal restored relations with Iran at the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Summit in Cairo in 2013.⁶⁸

Similarly, Iran's promotion of "Khomeinism" has likely influenced public attitudes of Nigerian Muslims and contributed to the recruitment base and ideological development of the IMN and other emerging Shi'a groups in Africa as well as non-Shi'a terrorist groups such as Boko Haram. Until 2011, Nigerian Muslims had higher levels of support for Hizb Allah and Hamas than Muslims in any non-Middle Eastern country and the most favorable views of al-Qa'ida and Usama bin Ladin in the world.⁶⁹ Boko Haram's transition from a Salafist preaching group to a jihadist group in September 2010, however, has led to more than 4,000 deaths in northern Nigeria and a significant drop in Nigerian Muslims' support for Boko Haram and foreign terrorist groups such as Hamas, Hizb Allah, and al-Qa'ida.⁷⁰

Second, there is the potential that Iran is preparing for a U.S. or Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities and other contingencies, such as the civil war

in Syria becoming a regional war.⁷¹ Al-Zakzaky said in a BBC interview in 2012 that if Iran were attacked the impact would be felt "not only in Nigeria, but in the entire world."⁷² Iranian-trained cells drawn from Nigeria's Shi'a community may be part of Iran's networks, and the possibility of them striking U.S. and Israeli interests in the case of an asymmetric war should not be ruled out.

Finally, an issue that remains beyond Iran's control is how the IMN will evolve if al-Zakzaky transfers leadership to more radical and violence-prone younger imams, such as 48-year-old Mustapha Lawan Nasidi or Yakubu Yahaya, or whether the IMN will fragment. History shows that when groups break from the IMN, they tend to become more violent, possibly because they no longer have al-Zakzaky discouraging them from physical confrontation with the government or with Sunnis and Christians.⁷³ If a successor to al-Zakzaky cannot maintain stable relations with Nigeria's Sunnis and Christians, especially with escalating sectarianism in Iraq and now Syria, then Nigeria may experience increased intra-religious conflict in addition to its pre-existing inter-religious conflicts.

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67 "Global Views of Iran Overwhelmingly Negative," Pew Research Center, June 11, 2013.

68 "Iran, Senegal Resume Diplomatic Ties: Report," Agence France-Presse, February 7, 2013.

69 "Muslim Publics Divided on Hamas and Hezbollah," Pew Research Center, December 2, 2010. The BBC also reported that in the months following the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States, there was a "massive rise" in newborn males named Usama (after Usama bin Ladin) in Nigeria, including 70% of newborn males at one hospital in Kano. See "Osama Baby Craze Hits Nigeria," BBC, January 3, 2002.

70 "Muslim Publics Share Concerns about Extremist Groups," Pew Research Center, September 10, 2013.

71 Guy Taylor, "Attack on Syria Likely to Trigger Terrorists Acts Against U.S., Israel," *Washington Times*, August 26, 2013; "Pro-Hezbollah Sheikh Warns U.S. Interests at Risk if Syria Hit," *Daily Star*, August 27, 2013.

72 Mark Lobel, "Sheikh Zakzaky: Why Nigeria Could Fear an Attack on Iran," BBC, May 8, 2012.

73 See, for example, the cases of the JTI members who split from al-Zakzaky and reportedly carried out the beheading of a Christian Igbo trader in Kano in 1994, as well as the interview of Nasir Isiaku, who left the "Shi'a" to join a Boko Haram cell in Kaduna that targeted Christians and security forces.

Kirkuk's Multidimensional Security Crisis

By Derek Henry Flood

SINCE THE U.S. MILITARY withdrew over the Kuwaiti border on December 18, 2011, the conflict in Iraq has morphed into a dangerous new phase where oil interests and bitter ethnic politics have left vulnerable, ordinary Iraqis caught in the middle. The unresolved issues of Kurdish autonomy combined with re-escalating Sunni-Shi'a discord are undergirded not solely by mere ideological drivers, but by an economic power struggle over the present and future wealth of the country's oil and gas reserves. This contest is especially evident in the oil-rich northern Iraqi province of Kirkuk.¹

Kirkuk is the gateway to, although not a part of, northern Iraq's relatively stable Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) area and is part of a territorial tug of war framed through a prism of ethnic rivalry between the KRG's leader, President Massoud Barzani, and Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.² This rivalry is supported by the importance of who will control Kirkuk's oil and gas fields. Kirkuk holds some of the world's most sought after petroleum reserves, making the future of who administers it critical to both the KRG and Baghdad. Kirkuk Province, with its flashpoint town of Hawija, has helped to reenergize al-Qa'ida's Islamic State of Iraq, which is now known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).³ The uncompromising manner in which Baghdad dealt with Sunni discontent in Hawija served as a catalyst for a broadening protest movement as well as an enabling factor for the resurgence of the country's al-Qa'ida branch that has transformed from a local to a now regional outfit.

This article argues that the still unresolved status of Kirkuk may be the most critical issue for the future integrity of the Iraqi state. It first discusses the growing hostility between Kurds in Kirkuk and in the KRG with al-Maliki's central government in Baghdad, and then shows how rising discontent among Sunni Arabs in Kirkuk Province serves as a further destabilizing factor. The article finds that while much of Iraq is suffering under an upsurge in religio-political violence in 2013, Kirkuk is a realm unto itself of insurgent aims due to the nature of its ethnic and sectarian complexity and the economic consequences of its future control. Kurdish state actors in Kirkuk and Erbil often feel that they are being challenged by both Sunni Arabs from various insurgent movements and Shi'a Arabs from either the al-Maliki government or non-state Shi'a militias who they believe share a common disdain for Kurdish ethno-nationalism.

Background

Following the 1990-1991 Gulf War and the late President Saddam Hussein's retribution against northern Kurds who had been fighting the post-colonial Iraqi state sporadically since 1961,⁴ a de facto autonomous Kurdish governance zone was established in the north. A border formed that separated regular Iraqi army troops with Kurdish *peshmerga* (Kurdish fighters). The two principle Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), firmly gained control of the three northern Iraqi provinces of Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniyya along with northeastern portions of Ninawa and Diyala provinces, and a small patch of Salah al-Din Province.⁵

When the post-Saddam constitution was adopted in October 2005, the stage was set for Kurdish and Shi'a empowerment, albeit of very different strains.⁶ For Kurdish leaders, one of the key achievements, at least in theory, was Article 140 of the constitution that

sought to redress the decades-long Ba'athist Arabization program. Under the large-scale population shuffle in the 1970s, Kurdish villagers were forcibly displaced and northern areas were repopulated with Arab tribes from western Iraq. The Ba'ath Party incentivized sympathetic Sunni Arab tribesmen to resettle in the cooler, irrigated lands of the traditionally Kurdish-majority north.⁷ Other non-Arab minorities, including Turkmen and Assyrians, were often expelled en masse. Many were either killed or fled Iraq altogether. The peak of the program culminated in the al-Anfal campaign that took place from February to September 1988 in which chemical weapons were ultimately used at the tail end of the Iran-Iraq war.⁸

Kirkuk city, located outside of the "no fly zone" beneath the so-called Green Line⁹ and therefore still under the control of Baghdad, became the focus of ongoing Arabization well after 1991. Cognizant of Kirkuk's intrinsic value, Ba'athist officials actively altered the city's contested demographics primarily with Arab Shi'a from southern Iraq throughout the 1990s.¹⁰ The plebiscite on the territorial status of Kirkuk vaguely outlined in Article 140—which could result in its formal annexation by the KRG—has failed to come to fruition since 2007 when it was originally scheduled to occur. This left the future of Kirkuk open to endless political infighting among Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen, which enabled insurgent attacks in the interim.¹¹ Meanwhile, the KRG has been trying to use cash and land grants to encourage Kurds to re-inhabit villages below the Green Line to create a deeper Kurdish foothold in the disputed territories, which could be useful in case of a future census or referendum.¹²

1 Kirkuk Province can alternately be referred to as Tamim Province. See Kenneth Katzman, *Iraq: Politics, Elections and Benchmarks* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2009), pp. 2, 10.

2 Liz Sly, "U.S. Policy on Iraq Questioned as Influence Wanes, Maliki Consolidates Power," *Washington Post*, April 8, 2012; Yochi Dreazen, "Iraq's New Strong Man," Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, October 14, 2011.

3 ISIL is commonly abbreviated as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham). See Sami Aboudi, "Iraqi al Qaeda Wing Merges with Syrian Counterpart," Reuters, April 9, 2013.

4 Michael M. Gunter, *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011), p. 155.

5 For a sample of the U.S. military's interpretation of the approximate Green Line from 1991-2003, see the map in "Developments in Iraq," Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, July 2012, p. 75.

6 "Draft Constitution Adopted by Iraqi Voters," Associated Press, October 25, 2005.

7 Hania Mufti and Peter Bouckaert, "Iraq, Claims in Conflict: Reversing Ethnic Cleansing in Northern Iraq," Human Rights Watch, 2004, p. 10.

8 Michael J. Kelly, *Ghosts of Halabja: Saddam Hussein and the Kurdish Genocide* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2008), pp. 23-31.

9 The Green Line is the nominal 1991 demarcation line that was between the Kurdish northern provinces of Iraq and the remainder controlled by Saddam Hussein.

10 Mufti and Bouckaert, pp. 46-47.

11 "Kirkuk in Limbo as Law Addressing Political Balance is Scrapped," IRIN, October 14, 2013.

12 Personal observations, Kirkuk Province, August 2,

A Tense Green Line: Renewed Hostility Between Kurds and the Central Government

The key issue along the Green Line is the so-called Disputed Territories or Disputed Internal Boundaries.¹³ These are districts within provinces running along the axis from northern Ninawa through Kirkuk southeast to Diyala which many Kurds want to see enveloped into the comparatively more secure KRG at some point. It is in these districts where ethnic politics meet the struggle over oil rights between Erbil and Baghdad's Oil Ministry. Pipelines and oil installations here are therefore more prone to insurgent attacks than those inside the KRG itself.

The lucrative yet vastly underperforming Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline has been constantly targeted by improvised explosive devices (IED) throughout mid-2013.¹⁴ Foreign oil companies are forced to choose between federal and Kurdish sides in terms of who controls what piece of territory, upon which there is no commonly agreed final determination. In September 2013, for example, BP signed a deal with the al-Maliki government to revamp Kirkuk's dilapidated primary oil field, sparking a bellicose reaction from the KRG. A spokesman from the KRG's Ministry of Natural Resources stated: "No company will be permitted to work in any part of the disputed territories including Kirkuk without formal approval and involvement of the KRG."¹⁵ Caught in the middle are Kirkuk's provincial authorities, who are trapped between an outdated Ba`ath period hydrocarbons law and an ambiguously interpreted constitution that they feel the al-Maliki government is exploiting to hold on to Kirkuk's wealth.¹⁶

Following the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, tensions along the Green Line synchronously ramped up in two ways. *Peshmerga* forces sought to further consolidate their control of areas they ardently view as historic Kurdish areas, and insurgent groups like the ISIL and Ba`athist fighters began to target security forces and civilians in Ninawa, Kirkuk, Salah al-Din, and Diyala with increasing ferocity. In the autumn of 2012, al-Maliki created the Dijla Operations Command to establish a stronger federal security presence along the Baghdad-controlled side of the Green Line—an act that the KRG's Peshmerga Ministry viewed as an unvarnished military provocation by the federal government. While the Dijla Operations Command was welcomed by segments of the disenfranchised Arab community in Kirkuk and met with mixed reactions by Turkmen whose local political leadership is divided about whether to side with security conscious Kurdish interests or those of Ankara,¹⁷ local Kurdish politicians made their concerns known in no uncertain terms.

Kirkuk's Kurds view the creation of the Dijla Operations Command as a sign of al-Maliki further centralizing Baghdad's authority in what is ideally meant to be a federalized Iraqi state at least in constitutional terms. Some Kurdish Kirkukis, both civilians and security forces alike, criticized al-Maliki's alleged allegiance to Tehran and his need to increase his own personal power.¹⁸ They also cited the presence of ethnic-Arab Dijla troops as reminiscent of the Ba`athist Arabization program despite the fact that al-Maliki is a practicing Shi'a who was an anti-Saddam activist as an exiled member of the Da`wa Party in the 1980s.

By mid-November 2012, both Kurds and federal forces were reportedly steadily increasing their armaments.¹⁹ A deadly incident in Tuz Khurmatu, in northeastern Salah al-Din Province,

between PUK-affiliated *peshmerga* and Iraqi forces on November 16 had some Iraqis fearing the two sides were on the brink of war.²⁰ Although a major armed conflict between the two sides on what is essentially a front line has thus far failed to materialize, keeping an eye on one another along the Green Line makes the prospect of robustly collaborating on stemming their common foes in the ISIL and the Jaysh Rijal al-Tariq al-Naqshabandi (JRTN) movement more problematic.

Al-Maliki's forces are facing opposition from several sides in the provinces with disputed districts. Although the ISIL is most associated with sectarian violence, it is also involved in anti-state violence and ethnic tension between Arabs and Kurds. The ISIL and other Arab-dominated *takfiri* groups are locked in an ongoing battle with the Kurdish Democratic Union Party's (PYD) Popular Protection Units (YPG) militia in northeastern Syria.²¹ The ISIL is attempting to stem the process of rudimentary sub-state formation by the PYD akin to the 1990s-era KRG in Iraq that could one day rupture Syria's territorial integrity. The ISIL views the secular KRG's maneuvers in Iraq's disputed territories as a threat to Islamism and Arab identity. For the ISIL in both the Syria and Iraq cases, hardline Salafism must trump divisive ethnic politics.

Owing to the centrality of the oil issue in the broader context of Iraq's instability, protests over the mismanagement of oil wealth by political elites have also erupted in the capital with demonstrators angrily chanting "oil is for the people, not the thieves."²² In the context of Iraq's rather monolithic economy so heavily dependent on oil production and exports, which account for 90% of its income, the future of the country's oil industry is of utmost importance to Baghdad, the KRG and the various insurgent movements that seek to harm both entities.²³

2013.

13 "Iraq and the Kurds: The High-Stakes Hydrocarbons Gambit," International Crisis Group, April 19, 2012.

14 "Oil Flow from Northern Iraq to Turkey Halted," *Hurriyet*, August 23, 2013; Kamarran al-Najar, "New Pipeline Bombing Adds to Kirkuk Field Woes," Iraq Oil Report, September 18, 2013.

15 Meeyoung Cho and Peg Mackey, "Iraq Signs Deal With BP to Revive Northern Kirkuk Oilfield," Reuters, September 12, 2013.

16 Tamsin Carlisle, "Trying to Sell the Advantages of Investing in Kirkuk Oil," *Platts*, October 14, 2013.

17 Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *Crisis in Kirkuk: The Ethnopolitics of Conflict and Compromise* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), p. 54.

18 Personal interviews, Kirkuk Province, August 2, 2013.

19 Karim Abed Zayer, "Maliki Deploys 'Tigris Force' to Kirkuk," *Azzaman*, November 13, 2012.

20 "Iraqi Forces Clash with Kurdish Troops, One Dead," Reuters, November 16, 2012.

21 Amberin Zaman, "Syrian Kurdish Leader Urges Turkey To End Support for Salafists," *al-Monitor*, October 9, 2013.

22 "Hundreds of Iraqis Protest Against Lawmaker Privileges," Reuters, August 31, 2013.

23 "IMF Says Iraq has Made Good Progress with its

Sunni Arab Discontent in Kirkuk after Hawija

In addition to the renewed tensions between Kurds and Baghdad, the al-Maliki government is also facing rising Sunni Arab discontent in Kirkuk Province. As al-Maliki began paving the way for a third term in office following a somewhat controversial court decision in August 2013, disenchanted Iraqis of all stripes had already begun to bristle at the rise of a new authoritarian leader.²⁴ Of these segments, Sunni Arabs, who have been transitioning into a minority status over the past decade, have been the most vocal. This tension has been especially evident in Kirkuk Province.

In post-Ba`athist Iraq, Sunni Arab marginalization has become so acute in the era of rule by al-Maliki's perceived Shi'a chauvinism and with continuing Kurdish economic and territorial gains in the north that a serious spike in violence is already well underway.²⁵ Al-Maliki's humiliation of several prominent Sunni political elites coupled with militarization along the Sunni Arab side of the Green Line helped set the stage for the resurgence of the ISIL.²⁶

The spark of much of the recent conflict took place in the restive town of Hawija in Kirkuk Province. Hawija was once referred to by the U.S. military as the "Anbar of the North" due to the danger the town posed to coalition troops.²⁷ Today, government and Kurdish forces are contending with an area where Sunni militancy never died but was merely tamped down for a period during the coalition's concerted counterinsurgency troop surge.

On April 23, 2013, Iraqi security forces led by the Army's 12th Division attacked a Sunni Arab protest camp in Hawija west of Kirkuk City.²⁸ The central government claimed they were engaging armed elements enmeshed within the

sit-in protestors.²⁹ In turn, protestors claimed they were simply attacked when unarmed.³⁰ In the immediate aftermath of the incident in Hawija, ordinary Sunni tribesmen took up arms against government targets.³¹ Meanwhile, insurgents belonging to the ISIL ramped up a series of suicide attacks across poorly secured northern cities like Mosul, Kirkuk and Tuz Khurmatu beneath the Green Line. The situation in Hawija also helped mobilize the JRTN. The JRTN—whose name indicates it is a militant Sufi outfit unlike the Salafi-jihadi al-Qa`ida—styles itself as a champion of Iraq's disenchanted Sunni Arabs, particularly in northern areas that abut districts disputed with Kurds.³²

Several security sources in Kirkuk Province described die-hard Ba`athist elements in the JRTN³³ as seeking to reverse Kurdish territorial gains and ambitions by employing methods commonly associated with Sunni insurgent groups, such as IEDs and ambushes. The JRTN—led at least nominally by Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, Iraq's vice president under Saddam—is quite active along the Green Line according to local security force leaders.³⁴

In the wake of the U.S. troop withdrawal, the JRTN has transformed its message from a nationalist anti-occupation resistance force to one bent on attacking the interests of the Iran-friendly, Shi'a-dominated al-Maliki government in Baghdad as well as Kurds who it disdains for their ethnic separatism.³⁵ Hawija has again become a key node of Sunni militancy within Iraq as an area where historic Ba`athist

sympathy combined with years of ISI violence have led groups like the JRTN and ISIL to find new common cause in anti-Shi'a, anti-government, and anti-Kurdish mass casualty attacks.³⁶

An Iraqi police commander in Dibis complained that the withdrawal of U.S. troops not only removed the buffer between Iraqi Army and *peshmerga* tensions, but also allowed for relatively unimpeded ISIL movement. In 2007, a major from the U.S. Army's 10th Mountain Division was quoted as saying: "The Hawija area will be an obstacle to militants, rather than a pathway for them."³⁷ Now that the American obstacle has been removed, Hawija is flush with Sunni ire as well as insurgency.

Along the Green Line, there is a confluence between ISIL Salafi-jihadism and anachronistic Ba`athist patriotism emphasized by the JRTN. Insurgents of both strains mutually seek to harm agents of the al-Maliki government or anyone they see as traitors. Police in Dibis said the difference between the ISIL and JRTN was tactical (i.e., suicide VBIEDS vs. IEDs), but their goals were presently the same in terms of restoring Sunni Arab supremacy in Iraq. In the view of many Kurds, as the ISIL has evolved from a largely Iraq-focused organization into a regional one with its involvement in the Syrian civil war, it has become a multi-front militant outfit simultaneously waging *takfiri* jihad while also attacking Kurds in the name of Arab identity politics.

Although violence in Iraq had been on a net decline at least in terms of hard casualty figures since the U.S. troop surge in 2007-2008, beginning in April 2013 Iraq has seen the highest cluster of death tolls since 2008.³⁸ Alongside the civilian and security force death figures, a significant uptick against northern oil export infrastructure has occurred, particularly affecting Ninawa and Kirkuk provinces.

Economy," BBC, October 1, 2010.

24 "Path Cleared for Maliki's Third Term as PM," Agence France-Presse, August 26, 2013.

25 "Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State," International Crisis Group, August 14, 2013.

26 "Sunni Grievances Drive Spike in Iraq Unrest," Agence France-Presse, May 26, 2013.

27 "Sons of Iraq Graduate Iraqi Police Training in Hawija," U.S. Central Command, May 16, 2008.

28 Adam Schreck, "Clashes Suggest Sunni Anger Boiling Over in Iraq," Associated Press, April 24, 2013.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ali Abel Sadah, "Sunni Tribes in Anbar, Kirkuk Prepare for Battle," *Iraq Pulse*, May 3, 2013.

32 Adam Schreck, "Group Tied to Old Guard Could Gain in Iraq Unrest," Associated Press, April 27, 2013.

33 For details on the JRTN, see Michael Knights, "The JRTN Movement and Iraq's Next Insurgency," *CTC Sentinel* 4:7 (2011).

34 Personal interviews, local security force leaders, Dibis, Kirkuk Province, Iraq, August 2, 2013.

35 Faye Sarah, "Iraq and Iran Aligned on Syria," *as-Safir*, November 9, 2012; Adam Schreck and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Iraq PM Maliki Warns Syria War Could Spread if Opposition Wins," Associated Press, February 27, 2013.

36 "Iraqi Special Force Kills Prince of al-Qaeda in Hawija," Shafaq News, October 19, 2013; "Key Qaeda Leader Killed in Hawijah," All Iraq News, October 19, 2013.

37 "Six Thousand Sunni Arabs Join Security Pact to Help U.S. Forces Block Terrorist Escape Routes," Associated Press, November 28, 2007.

38 "Iraq's May Death of Over 1,000 is Worst Since 2008, UN Says," Associated Press, June 1, 2013.

The frequency of IED attacks on the crude export pipeline connecting Kirkuk's supergiant oil field to the port city of Ceyhan in southern Turkey's Adana Province has conservatively become a weekly occurrence. An official from the state-owned North Oil Company cited some 37 attacks on the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline between late June and late August 2013 alone.³⁹ The constant disruptions in output on the already well-aged pipes may accelerate the fragmentation of Iraq's tenuous federal governance arrangement. The KRG, based in the northern city of Erbil, seeks to create new routes to Turkey entirely within territory under its control, thereby creating potentially lucrative energy sector independence from Baghdad.⁴⁰ The persistent attacks on federally controlled pipelines both hurt Baghdad economically and exacerbate Arab-Kurdish tensions. They also help to justify the Kurds' arguments for managing their own natural resource exports.

The KRG is simultaneously entertaining foreign investors to economically solidify its control over the three northern provinces of Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniyya, while bolstering *peshmerga* positions along the Green Line that separates KRG-controlled Kurdistan from Arab-majority Iraq.

Conclusion

In the decade since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, fears remain that Iraq might fracture along ethnic, sectarian and economic lines. Although the ISI/ISIL has escalated attacks since late 2012, the Hawija incident and the war in Syria seem to have emboldened it much more in recent months.⁴¹ The KRG's *peshmerga* and Asayish forces have also become more assertive after Hawija to counter the twin threats of reinvigorated Sunni militancy and the presence of al-Maliki's Dijla Operations Command.

As the KRG has continued to attract foreign direct investment while strengthening its own security apparatus and deftly annexing disputed territories on the Arab-majority side of the Green Line, the societal fissures within Iraq have only deepened. Recently, Atheel Nujaifi, the governor of Ninawa—home to the turbulent Mosul—announced that his province would be inking its own deals with foreign energy firms despite fierce objections by the Oil Ministry in Baghdad.⁴²

The al-Maliki government, while irked by the KRG and now Ninawa's possible outside oil contract moves, has done little to stop the destruction of northern oil infrastructure key to its own economic survival. Militants can now travel freely from eastern Syria to northern Iraq as the Syrian war grinds on.⁴³ This will have the likely effect of the KRG hardening its militarized territorial absorption program to securitize Kurdish villages or historic Kurdish areas and stave off jihadist infiltration well beyond the recognized three provinces of the KRG. Despite the ethnic and sectarian prism through which the bloodshed in northern Iraq is viewed, it must be noted that bitter economic competition over oil and gas resources importantly underpins all of the aforementioned conflicts in the locally-held long view.

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The Battle for Syria's Al-Hasakah Province

By Nicholas A. Heras

SYRIA'S RESOURCE-RICH, northeastern province of al-Hasakah presents a complex human terrain where conflict is driven by the patchwork authority of the Syrian military and local and long-standing communal antagonism. Control over al-Hasakah Province, which has an ethnic Kurdish plurality, is important to the Kurds who are seeking greater autonomy and self-rule from the Syrian state. Al-Hasakah's oil resources are also important and a source of frequent conflict between Arab and Kurdish armed groups.

This article provides background on the human geography of al-Hasakah Province, highlights the sites of most frequent conflict, and examines the major actors in the fight for control of the province. It finds that while the Kurdish community of al-Hasakah is well positioned to assert its political and military power over its areas of the province, it will still face competition from the remnants of the Syrian military in the region and Arab armed groups. The Kurds also will have to convince the region's other ethnic and sectarian minorities that they are genuine and equal partners in governance.

Human Geography of Al-Hasakah Province

Al-Hasakah is one of Syria's most diverse provinces, with an estimated population of approximately 1.5 million people, a plurality of whom are ethnic Kurds that are present in both rural villages and the province's major urban areas.¹ The three largest cities of the region, al-Hasakah, Qamishli, and Ras al-Ayn, all have diverse populations that include ethnic Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians²

39 "Iraq Oil Exports to Turkey Halted by Pipeline Attack," Agence France-Presse, August 21, 2013.

40 "Turkey-KRG Pipeline 'Close to Completion,'" Reuters, August 22, 2013; Ben van Heuvelen, "New Gas Pipeline Reinforces Turkey-KRG Ties," Iraq Oil Report, October 6, 2013.

41 Jim Muir, "Iraq: Prospects of Partition as Violence Takes its Toll," BBC, May 2, 2013.

42 Ziad al-Sanjary, "Iraq Province Empowers Governor to Sign Oil Deals Without Baghdad," Reuters, September 19, 2013.

43 Personal interviews, Iraqi police and military, Dibis district, Kirkuk Province, Iraq, August 2, 2013.

1 Syria Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011, available at www.citypopulation.de/Syria.html#Land. Also see Basheer al-Baker, "Uncovering Syria (III): Counting on Kurds," *al-Akhbar*, September 13, 2011.

2 The Assyrians are a distinct Semitic ethnic group whose mother tongue is "Syriac," a language that evolved from Aramaic. A majority of ethnic Assyrians are adherents of Christianity, and ethnic Assyrians who are members of the Chaldean Catholic Church are sometimes referred to as "Chaldeans." Ethnic Assyrian communities are traditionally located in northeastern Syria, northwestern Iraq, southeastern Turkey, Lebanon, and in the global

(with Orthodox, Chaldean Catholic, and Church of the East sects represented), Armenians, Turkmen,³ and members of the Yazidi⁴ faith in and around the city of Ras al-Ayn. Al-Hasakah Province is primarily an agricultural area whose population is centered along the north-south flowing Khabur River between the city of Ras al-Ayn on the Turkish border and the province's capital of al-Hasakah city, or northeast of the Khabur in a particularly fertile region that is located in the administrative districts of Qamishli and the city of al-Malikiyya.⁵

The Khabur River serves as the semi-official western boundary of al-Hasakah Province. Several ethnic and sectarian groups—including Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Armenians, Chechens/Circassians, and Yazidis—are present along the course of the river between Ras al-Ayn and al-Hasakah.⁶ Assyrians,

diaspora in Europe, the United States, and Australia. Also see Alberto M. Fernandez, "Dawn at Tell Tamir: The Assyrian Christian Survival and the Khabur River," Assyrian International News Agency, undated.

3 The Turkmen are descendants of Oghuz tribal, ethnic Turkic migrants who moved into the area of Syria in the 10th century. See Nicholas A. Heras, "Syrian Turkmen Join Opposition Forces in Pursuit of a New Syrian Identity," *Terrorism Monitor* 11:11 (2013).

4 The Yazidis are ethnic Kurds who are adherents of an esoteric religion that synthesizes belief from Zoroastrian, Manichean, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sources. It is estimated that there are 50,000 Yazidis in Syria, 20,000-25,000 of whom live in rural areas of al-Hasakah Province and in the city of Qamishli. Some estimates, however, place the number of Yazidis in Syria much lower. See "Yazidis in Syria: Between Acceptance and Marginalization," KurdWatch, December 2010.

5 These details are based on the author's field research conducted in al-Hasakah Province in March 2010, as well as personal interviews, Arab tribal youth economic migrants, Beirut, Lebanon, June-August 2009. For details on Qamishli, see "Al-Qamishli: Demographics," SyriaToday.ca, undated; Hasan Biro, "In Qamishli, Tensions Rise Between PKK and Syrian Army," Syria Deeply, April 22, 2013; "Al-Qamishli," Encyclopaedia Britannica, undated. For details on al-Hasakah, see "Al-Hasakah Joins the Fight with Assad Forces," Zaman al-Wsl, July 10, 2013; "Al-Hasakah City," Homs Online, undated. For details on al-Malikiyya, see "Cities: Al-Malikiyyah," KurdWatch, undated.

6 For Assyrians, see "Assyrian Villages in Khabur Syria," Assyrian International News Agency, 2013. For Chechens/Circassians, see Dawn Chatty, "Circassian, Chechnyan, and Other Muslim Communities," in *Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 108-110. For Ar-

menians, Kurds, and Arabs, see Fernandez; al-Baker.

7 "Assyrian Villages in Khabur Syria," Assyrian International News Agency, 2013.

8 The Ba'ath Party in Syria has attempted to weaken Sunni Arab tribalism as a primary form of social mobilization in al-Hasakah Province since it assumed power in the country in 1963. These details are based on the author's field research conducted in al-Hasakah Province in March 2010, as well as personal interviews, Arab tribal youth economic migrants, Beirut, Lebanon, June-August 2009. Also see Carole A. O'Leary and Nicholas A. Heras, "Syrian Tribal Networks and their Implications for the Syrian Uprising," *Terrorism Monitor* 10:11 (2012).

9 These details are based on the author's field research conducted in al-Hasakah Province in March 2010, as well as personal interviews, Arab tribal youth economic migrants, Beirut, Lebanon, June-August 2009.

10 Ibid. Also see O'Leary and Heras, "Syrian Tribal Networks and their Implications for the Syrian Uprising."

11 Ibid. Lauren Williams, "Tribes of Syria and Iraq Drawn Into the Uprising," *Daily Star* [Beirut], November 15, 2012; Tim Arango and Duraid Adnan, "For Iraqis, Aid to Rebels in Syria Repays a Debt," *New York Times*, February 12, 2012; Phil Sands, "Oil, Food, and Protest in Syria's East," *The National*, January 17, 2012.

although present in other areas of the province including the cities of al-Malikiyya, Qamishli, Ras al-Ayn, and al-Hasakah, have been greatly concentrated in a series of 35 villages that follow the path of the river from Ras al-Ayn to al-Hasakah.⁷ Throughout the northern regions of the province, ethnic and sectarian groups live in close proximity to each other in neighboring or mixed villages.

The predominate form of social identity and mobilization among Sunni Arabs in al-Hasakah Province is through Sunni Arab tribalism.⁸ Sunni Arab tribes in the region include branches of multinational tribal confederations such as the Shammar, the Ougaidat, the Baggara, the Taie, and the Jabbour, and smaller tribal groups such as the al-Sharabiyya and the Zubayd.⁹ Ougaidat, Shammar, and the Albu Hassan branch of the Baggara that predominate in the province's southern sub-districts of al-Arisha, al-Shaddadeh, and Markadah maintain close ties to their kinsmen in neighboring Deir al-Zour Province.¹⁰ Several of the region's Sunni Arab tribes, including the Shammar, Jabbour, and the Baggara, also have cross-border ties with fellow tribesmen in Iraq which they have drawn upon for social and armed support during the course of the Syrian civil war.¹¹

menians, Kurds, and Arabs, see Fernandez; al-Baker.

7 "Assyrian Villages in Khabur Syria," Assyrian International News Agency, 2013.

8 The Ba'ath Party in Syria has attempted to weaken Sunni Arab tribalism as a primary form of social mobilization in al-Hasakah Province since it assumed power in the country in 1963. These details are based on the author's field research conducted in al-Hasakah Province in March 2010, as well as personal interviews, Arab tribal youth economic migrants, Beirut, Lebanon, June-August 2009. Also see Carole A. O'Leary and Nicholas A. Heras, "Syrian Tribal Networks and their Implications for the Syrian Uprising," *Terrorism Monitor* 10:11 (2012).

9 These details are based on the author's field research conducted in al-Hasakah Province in March 2010, as well as personal interviews, Arab tribal youth economic migrants, Beirut, Lebanon, June-August 2009.

10 Ibid. Also see O'Leary and Heras, "Syrian Tribal Networks and their Implications for the Syrian Uprising."

11 Ibid. Lauren Williams, "Tribes of Syria and Iraq Drawn Into the Uprising," *Daily Star* [Beirut], November 15, 2012; Tim Arango and Duraid Adnan, "For Iraqis, Aid to Rebels in Syria Repays a Debt," *New York Times*, February 12, 2012; Phil Sands, "Oil, Food, and Protest in Syria's East," *The National*, January 17, 2012.

In the northern, Kurdish-majority areas of al-Hasakah Province, many of these Sunni Arab tribal groups were settled in the area from 1965-1976 as part of the "Arab Belt" policy of the Ba'ath government, which established government-built Arab communities on land taken from resident Kurds that were situated amidst Kurdish villages.¹² It is estimated that approximately 60,000 Kurds were displaced from their land by this policy.¹³ Ougaidat, Shammar and Baggara, who predominate in the province's southern sub-districts of al-Arisha, al-Shaddadeh, and Markadah, also maintain close ties to their kinsmen in neighboring Deir al-Zour Province.¹⁴ Some Sunni Arab tribesmen participate in armed opposition groups that fight against both the al-Assad government and the Kurdish militias in the region, including the al-Qa'ida-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra.¹⁵ One particular tribally organized armed group that has cooperated with Jabhat al-Nusra in the region is the "Free Jazira Brigade," which is organized by Shammar tribesmen and is an affiliate of the Free Syrian Army that has a presence near the Syrian-Iraqi border in the northeastern Yarubiyya sub-district.¹⁶

12 For some details, see J. Michael Kennedy, "Kurds Remain on the Sideline of Syria's Uprising," *New York Times*, April 17, 2012.

13 It is estimated that more than 120,000 Syrian Kurds were denied Syrian citizenship, the majority in al-Hasakah Province, and were thus rendered stateless, on the basis of a controversial 1962 census. Their children were born stateless and thus increased the population of stateless Kurds to 300,000 out of an estimated population of 1.7 million Kurds in Syria. In April 2011, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad passed a decree that formally granted most of these stateless Kurds citizenship. For more information on Kurdish statelessness and modern repression in Syria, see "Syria-Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria," Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 8; Kennedy; "Syria: State Policies and Military Action Continue to Threaten Further Displacement," Norwegian Refugee Council Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, November 11, 2011.

14 These details are based on the author's field research conducted in Deir al-Zour Province in July 2009, al-Hasakah Province in March 2010, as well as personal interviews, Arab tribal youth economic migrants, Beirut, Lebanon, June-August 2009.

15 For more information on tribal armed groups in the Syrian conflict, see Carole A. O'Leary and Nicholas A. Heras, "The Tribal Factor in Syria's Rebellion: A Survey of Armed Tribal Groups in Syria," *Terrorism Monitor* 11:13 (2013).

16 Mariam Ballout, "The Battle for the North, an Offshoot of the Syrian War: The Fight for Oil Between Kurds, Ji-

The Kurds Developing an Incipient Authority in Al-Hasakah?

Currently, the strongest political and military position in the region belongs to the Kurds and their armed organizations, particularly the Popular Protection Units (YPG). While in the past the YPG has been charged with being an organization with close ties to the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the YPG's leadership is trying to position itself as a pan-ethnic organization that is the defender of all of the region's communities—both from the al-Assad government and Salafi-jihadi organizations that are trying to impose an Islamic state on Syria.¹⁷ YPG leaders also insist that the organization is apolitical and subsumes itself under the Supreme Kurdish Committee, which includes the PYD and the umbrella organization the Kurdish National Council (KNC) that is close to KRG President Massoud Barzani.¹⁸ YPG forces are estimated to total more than 30,000 fighters from all ethnic and sectarian communities.¹⁹

Conflict in the vicinity of the Khabur River is leading to the militarization of some of the area's ethnic and sectarian communities or leading them to turn to the YPG for armed support and organization. Assyrian communities in the area have begun to form militias that man checkpoints to guard access points to their villages. They are reportedly being organized and trained by an ethnic Assyrian, former Swiss Army soldier and are seeking the assistance of the YPG.²⁰ Yazidi villagers are stated to have been threatened by Salafi-jihadi fighters and as a result have either fled their villages or are turning to the

YPG for armed support.²¹ In addition, the al-Sharabiyya and Zubayd Arab tribal communities in the area also reportedly feel sufficiently threatened by the ongoing conflict in Ras al-Ayn and have accepted arms and affiliation with the YPG.²²

Major Sites of Conflict in Al-Hasakah

The fighting in al-Hasakah Province demonstrates the complexity of the region and the nature of the al-Assad government's patchwork authority in it. Fighting in the region, combined with a poor economy and increasingly difficult access to food resources and basic medicine, has led to internal displacement from conflict areas such as Ras al-Ayn.²³ In late August and early September 2013, more than 30,000 refugees fled to Iraqi Kurdistan, overcrowding existing refugee camps in that region, such as in the province of Dohuk, which has been forced to accommodate more than 55,000 refugees in a camp that was meant for 15,000.²⁴

While the Syrian military retains its strongest outposts in the cities of al-Hasakah and Qamishli, it has ceded a great deal of territory in al-Hasakah Province to local armed groups.²⁵ The southern countryside of the city of al-Hasakah, in the sub-districts of al-Arisha, ash-Shaddada, and Markada, is the site of clashes. The town of ash-Shaddada in particular has seen fierce fighting, with Salafi-jihadi forces led by Jabhat al-Nusra presently retaining control over it and reportedly exploiting its local oil resources for profit.²⁶

Ras al-Ayn, contiguous as it is with the Turkish city of Ceylanpinar, is a convenient logistical route for the armed opposition. Ras al-Ayn is also a fault line area that Sunni Arab Salafi-jihadi organizations would seek to incorporate into an Islamic state and Syrian Kurds would like to be part of a potentially autonomous Western Kurdistan.²⁷ Low intensity conflict has been ongoing in Ras al-Ayn since the end of 2012, with the latest bouts in July and August the most intense and destructive since Kurds and Arabs began to clash for control over the city.²⁸

The second major site of conflict in al-Hasakah Province is in the far northeast districts of al-Qahtaniyya and al-Malikiyya, particularly in the sub-district of Tal Hamis in al-Qahtaniyya and the sub-district of Yarubiyya in al-Malikiyya.²⁹ Tal Hamis and Yarubiyya abut the Syrian-Iraqi border area of Rabia in the Tal Afar region of Ninawa Province. This area has been the focus of frequent clashes between the Syrian military—which has conducted airstrikes against Sunni Arab armed opposition groups, the YPG and its local allies—and a reportedly tenuous alliance of Sunni Arab armed opposition groups that seeks to control the oil fields in and around the towns of Mabadi (Girke Lege in Kurdish), Gar Zero, and Suweidia, and the Syrian-Iraqi border crossing of Yarubiyya/Rabia which have been used to smuggle armed opposition fighters and materiel into Syria.³⁰ Armed opposition fighters

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30 For airstrike and oil field coalition, see Ballout. For

seized the Yarubiyya crossing on the Syrian side of the border in March 2013, reportedly out of a motivation to prevent the flow of military assistance from the Iraqi government of Nuri al-Maliki to the government of Bashar al-Assad.³¹

Several Sunni Arab armed groups are present in the sub-districts of Tal Hamis and Yarubiyya, including Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qa`ida's Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and the Shammar tribe-affiliated Free Jazira Brigade.³² Other armed opposition organizations that report their participation in the battle for the area include local affiliates of the Salafi-jihadi group Ahrar al-Sham and the Islamist group Tajammu` Kata'ib al-Haqq.³³ Salih Muslim, the leader of the PYD, has stated that Kurds control 60% of the country's oil wells, although this figure has yet to be independently verified.³⁴ Fighting for control of the oil fields around Rmeilan is likely to continue well into the future, as they offer a potentially lucrative source of income for whoever controls them.

Conclusion

The pattern of conflict in al-Hasakah Province is a war of positioning in the context of the Syrian military's receding power in the region. The al-Assad government is forced to rely upon an outpost strategy where the cities of al-Hasakah and Qamishli represent its most secure means of implementing a patchwork influence upon the various constituent ethnic and sectarian communities in the province. Into this vacuum, the Kurdish parties and

militias, tentatively organized under the over-arching Supreme Kurdish Committee, are trying to establish an incipient form of civil governance in the region, even if it stops short of seeking complete autonomy or independence from the Syrian state. The success of this effort will depend upon the ability of the Supreme Kurdish Committee to convince al-Hasakah's ethnic and sectarian minorities—Assyrians, Armenians, Yazidis and Turkmen—and Arabs that it can work with them to constitute an unbiased, pan-communal authority.

Currently, the YPG is publicly positioning itself to contribute to this process by seeking to become the region's core defensive force charged with the protection of all of al-Hasakah's constituent communities. As it distances itself from earlier charges of its close affiliation with the PYD, the YPG leadership will also need to continue to demonstrate battlefield successes against its antagonists, primarily Sunni armed groups such as the Salafi-jihadi organizations and tribal militias. It will also need to develop into a genuinely pan-ethnic fighting force to buttress the Supreme Kurdish Committee's claims of representing all people in the province.

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32 Ballout.

33 "Liberating the Village of Jneeda of the Border District Ya`rubiyah," Ahrar al-Sham, July 25, 2013; "Ugarit, al-Hasakah: Gathering of the Divine Truth Brigades Rebel Convoy Heading to Free the Qamishli Al-Bajaria Checkpoint," July 12, 2013, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtOwtS2GT78&desktop_uri=%252Fwatch?v=GtOwtS2GT78&app=desktop.

34 Ballout; "Muslim: 60% of Syrian Oil Controlled By Kurds," Firat News Agency, May 9, 2013; Josh Wood, "Syria's Oil Resources are a Source of Contention for Competing Groups," *New York Times*, March 20, 2013.

Recent Highlights in Terrorist Activity

September 2, 2013 (AFGHANISTAN): Taliban militants torched a number of NATO supply trucks and then attacked part of a U.S. military outpost in Nangarhar Province. Three insurgents were killed. Officials said that no Afghan or U.S. soldiers died in the attack. – *Reuters*, September 2; *BBC*, September 2

September 2, 2013 (SOMALIA): U.S. citizen Omar Hammami told Voice of America that while he still considers himself a terrorist, he is no longer a member of the Somali militant group al-Shabab or al-Qa`ida. Hammami, who has been indicted by a federal grand jury in the United States, said that al-Shabab's leader, Ahmed Godane, is trying to kill him. Hammami, a 29-year-old from Alabama, is wanted by the U.S. government for providing material support to al-Shabab, an al-Qa`ida affiliate. – *Voice of America*, September 5

September 3, 2013 (IRAQ): Gunmen entered the house of a Sunni, pro-government militia member in southern Baghdad and beheaded him, as well as his wife and three children. – *Reuters*, September 3

September 3, 2013 (IRAQ): A series of car bombs killed nearly 60 people in predominately Shi'a districts of Baghdad. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant later claimed responsibility. – *Reuters*, September 3; *AFP*, September 8

September 5, 2013 (EGYPT): A suspected suicide bomber in a vehicle attacked the convoy of Egyptian Interior Minister Mohammed Ibrahim in Cairo, wounding seven people. Ibrahim was not injured in the attack. The Egyptian terrorist group Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, which is based in the Sinai Peninsula, claimed responsibility. – *AP*, September 6; *CBS*, September 9

September 7, 2013 (AFGHANISTAN): The Taliban said that they released an Afghan female member of parliament held hostage since August 10 in exchange for the release of six prisoners. The released prisoners—four women and two children—were family members of Taliban fighters. – *AFP*, September 7

September 7, 2013 (SOMALIA): Al-Shabab militants targeted the busy Village restaurant in Mogadishu, killing 15 people. The attack involved a suicide bomber and a car bomb. – *Reuters, September 7*

September 8, 2013 (AFGHANISTAN): Taliban suicide bombers attacked offices of the provincial intelligence department in Wardak Province, killing at least four Afghan intelligence staff. – *BBC, September 8*

September 9, 2013 (JORDAN): Four men appeared in a military court in Jordan to face charges of fighting with Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. Jabhat al-Nusra is linked to al-Qa`ida. – *AP, September 9*

September 10, 2013 (NORTH AFRICA): A new video of Mokhtar Belmokhtar emerged, ending speculation over whether he was killed in March 2013. Belmokhtar, the leader of the terrorist group behind the attack on the Ain Amenas gas plant in Algeria in January 2013 that left 37 foreign workers dead, retains links with al-Qa`ida even though he is no longer a member of the group's Africa affiliate, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb. According to CBS News, "The new video shows the one-eyed leader of the 'Signatories with their Blood' group, Belmokhtar, chatting with another prominent jihadist, Abdel Hamid Abou Zaid, who was also said by the French to have been killed during confrontations with their forces in northern Mali earlier in the year." – *CBS, September 10*

September 10, 2013 (IRAQ): A series of bombings targeting both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims in Iraq killed at least 20 people. – *Reuters, September 10*

September 11, 2013 (GLOBAL): Somalia's al-Shabab militant group, which is an al-Qa`ida affiliate, released a series of posts on Twitter celebrating the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on the United States. The militants vowed that the mujahidin will "continue with their jihad against the West until the world is ruled by one sovereign state, an Islamic state." – *AFP, September 11*

September 11, 2013 (IRAQ): A suicide bomber detonated explosives in a crowd of Shi'a worshippers at a mosque in Baghdad, killing at least 30 people.

Another man wearing a suicide vest, who apparently planned to attack police when they arrived in response to the first blast, was arrested nearby. – *CNN, September 11*

September 11, 2013 (LIBYA): A car bomb exploded near Libya's Foreign Ministry building in Benghazi, exactly one year after an attack in the same city that killed the U.S. ambassador and three other Americans. In the latest attack, there were no serious casualties. – *Washington Post, September 11*

September 11, 2013 (EGYPT): Two suicide bombers drove their explosives-laden vehicles into military targets in the town of Rafah in the Sinai Peninsula, killing at least six soldiers. – *CBS, September 11*

September 11, 2013 (SYRIA): According to reports, an Australian jihadist, known as Abu Asma al-Australi, drove an explosives-laden truck into a Syrian military checkpoint close to the Deir al-Zour military airport. It is not clear how many people died in the explosion, although jihadist websites claimed that 35 Syrian soldiers were killed. Al-Australi fought for the al-Qa`ida-linked Jabhat al-Nusra. – *Australian Broadcasting Corporation, September 14; Sydney Morning Herald, September 14*

September 11, 2013 (THAILAND): Suspected separatist gunmen ambushed a Thai police patrol in Yala Province in southern Thailand, killing five officers. – *UPI, September 12*

September 12, 2013 (SOMALIA): Omar Hammami, a U.S.-born former member of al-Shabab, was killed in a firefight with al-Shabab militants in Somalia. Hammami, who referred to himself as a "former poster boy" of al-Shabab, accused its leader, Ahmed Godane, of betraying al-Qa`ida's East Africa operative Fazul Abdullah Muhammad, who was killed in 2011. In recent months, Hammami wrote on his Twitter account that al-Shabab was trying to kill him. – *AFP, September 12*

September 12, 2013 (SYRIA): The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) declared an offensive against the Faruq and Nasr battalions, two fellow rebel factions fighting against the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad.

The ISIL said that the two rebel groups attacked its forces and suggested that they may have collaborated with the Syrian regime. – *Reuters, September 13*

September 12, 2013 (PHILIPPINES): The Abu Sayyaf Group and the newly-formed Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters combined forces to attack government troops in Lamitan in the southern Philippines. Three soldiers were wounded in the attack. According to the *New York Times*, "The violence raised fears of a widening of the insurgent threat in the area, where the government has for decades been struggling to contain attacks by Muslim-led groups." – *New York Times, September 12*

September 13, 2013 (GLOBAL): Al-Qa`ida chief Ayman al-Zawahiri released a new audio message marking the 12th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on the United States. Al-Zawahiri called for more acts of "lone wolf" terrorism against the United States. He said, "We must bleed America economically by provoking it, so that it continues its massive expenditures on security...Keeping America in a state of tension and anticipation does not cost us anything but [organizing] dispersed strikes here and there." Al-Zawahiri further specified, "These dispersed strikes can be carried out by one brother, or a small number of brothers." Separately, al-Zawahiri urged restraint in attacking other Muslim sects and non-Muslims, and in starting wars in countries where jihadists have a safe base to organize. "As far as targeting the proxies of America is concerned, it differs from place to place," he said. "The basic principle is to avoid entering into any conflict with them, except in the countries where confronting them becomes inevitable." – *BBC, September 13; Reuters, September 16*

September 13, 2013 (AFGHANISTAN): Two suicide bombers in vehicles attacked the U.S. Consulate in Herat Province. After the explosions, Taliban militants on foot engaged in a firefight with Afghan security forces around the compound. At least seven militants died, while at least two Afghans were killed. – *AP, September 13*

September 14, 2013 (AFGHANISTAN): A suicide bomber in a vehicle killed at least three civilians near Kandahar

in southern Afghanistan. – *RFE/RL, September 14*

September 14, 2013 (IRAQ): A suicide bomber attacked a funeral near Mosul, Ninawa Province, killing at least 20 people. The attack targeted the Shabak minority sect. The Shabak are ethnic Turkmen and Shi'a Muslims. – *AP, September 14*

September 14, 2013 (YEMEN): Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula confirmed that a U.S. drone strike killed one of its leaders, Qaid al-Dahab, at the end of August 2013. He was killed in Bayda Province. – *AP, September 15*

September 15, 2013 (PAKISTAN): A roadside bomb killed a Pakistani general and another officer in Upper Dir District of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province. The officers were visiting a military outpost near the border with Afghanistan. The Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility. – *Reuters, September 15*

September 16, 2013 (SPAIN): Spanish authorities arrested the alleged leader of a terrorist recruitment network in the Spanish North African enclave of Ceuta. The suspect, Spanish citizen Yassin Ahmed Laarbi, is accused of sending 50 militants to carry out attacks for al-Qa`ida-linked groups in Syria. – *Fox News, September 17*

September 16, 2013 (RUSSIA): A suicide bomber in a vehicle killed three police outside a police station in Russia's Chechnya region. – *Reuters, September 16*

September 16, 2013 (NORTH AFRICA): Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb released a new video showing seven kidnapped Westerners, including four Frenchmen. The four French nationals were kidnapped in northern Niger in September 2010. The other three hostages—a Dutchman, a Swede and a South African—were abducted in northern Mali in November 2011. – *Business Standard, September 17; AFP, September 16*

September 17, 2013 (IRAQ): A series of car bombs in Baghdad killed at least 31 people. – *AP, September 17*

September 17, 2013 (LIBYA): A car bomb killed the head of a criminal investigations unit in Benghazi. – *AP, September 17*

September 17, 2013 (NIGERIA): Boko Haram militants disguised in military uniforms killed at least 142 people in the Benisheik area in Borno State. According to a "security source" quoted in Agence France-Presse, the militants "came in droves, driving about 20 pickup trucks." – *AFP, September 20; AFP, September 22*

September 18, 2013 (AFGHANISTAN): Taliban gunmen on motorbikes killed a senior election official in Kunduz Province. After the attack, the Taliban took responsibility on Twitter, apparently the first time the group used Twitter to officially claim responsibility for an assassination. – *Dawn, September 18; New York Times, September 18*

September 18, 2013 (AFGHANISTAN): Taliban fighters attacked a police convoy in Badakhshan Province, killing 10 policemen. – *Reuters, September 19*

September 18, 2013 (SYRIA): The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) overran the Syrian town of Azaz, two miles from the Turkish border. According to one activist, fighting broke out among rebel groups after a Free Syrian Army unit refused to allow the ISIL to abduct a German doctor working as a volunteer at a private hospital in Azaz. – *Reuters, September 18*

September 18, 2013 (JORDAN): A Jordanian military tribunal jailed six men for trying to join the al-Qa`ida-linked Jabhat al-Nusra rebel group in Syria. According to a Jordanian official, "The convicts, arrested in December as they tried to cross the border, were charged with carrying out acts that would expose Jordan and its citizens to the risk of acts of aggression and revenge." – *AFP, September 18*

September 19, 2013 (UNITED STATES): According to the *Washington Post*, "A U.S. Army veteran accused of fighting alongside a Syrian rebel group linked to al-Qa`ida and charged with conspiracies that could have landed him in prison for life pleaded guilty Thursday to a less onerous count and was given a sentence of 'time served.'" Eric Harroun, of

Phoenix, was arrested in March 2013, and he apparently admitted he worked alongside Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qa`ida-linked rebel group. – *Washington Post, September 19; CNN, September 20*

September 20, 2013 (YEMEN): Suspected al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) militants killed at least 31 Yemeni soldiers and policemen in multiple attacks in Shabwa Province in southern Yemen. – *Reuters, September 20*

September 20, 2013 (SYRIA): Hundreds of rebels pledged allegiance to the al-Qa`ida-affiliated groups Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in northern and eastern Syria. – *Reuters, September 20*

September 21, 2013 (PAKISTAN/AFGHANISTAN): Pakistan's Foreign Ministry confirmed that Mullah Baradar, a founder of the Afghan Taliban and its former military commander, has been released by authorities in Pakistan to improve the chances for peace talks. – *Telegraph, September 21*

September 21, 2013 (IRAQ): A suicide bomber detonated an explosives-laden vehicle near a tent filled with Shi'a mourners in Baghdad's Sadr City, killing 25 people. – *Reuters, September 21*

September 21, 2013 (KENYA): Al-Shabab militants conducted a major terrorist attack against the upscale Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, killing at least 67 people in a multi-day siege. – *AP, September 21*

September 22, 2013 (IRAQ): A suicide bomber detonated his explosives inside a tent full of mourners in a predominately Sunni district of Baghdad, killing at least 16 people. – *Reuters, September 22*

September 22, 2013 (PAKISTAN): Two suicide bombers detonated their explosives outside an Anglican church after the Sunday service in Peshawar, killing at least 78 people. It marked the deadliest attack in recent history on Christians in Pakistan. – *Australian Broadcasting Corporation, September 23*

September 22, 2013 (SYRIA): Clashes among rebel groups in Syria resulted in the death of a local leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The leader, Abu Abdullah al-Libi, was the

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amir of the ISIL in Idlib Province. – *AFP*, September 22

September 24, 2013 (SYRIA): A car bomb exploded in Damascus, killing at least seven civilians. – *Reuters*, September 24

September 25, 2013 (SYRIA): The Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Kurdish militia based in Syria, killed seven rebels from al-Qa`ida's Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in Atma, a town on the Turkish border. – *Reuters*, September 26

September 25, 2013 (NIGERIA): Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau appeared in a new video, boasting of his invincibility and promised that there would be "no democracy in Nigeria." Shekau, who was supposedly killed in a gun battle in June, said, "It was said that I was killed, but here I am; I deliberately refused to respond on time; but here I am talking and laughing at Nigerian authority who misled the world that I am dead." He further said, "The concept of government of the people by the people, for the people cannot continue to exist. It shall soon, very soon, be replaced by 'Government of Allah, by Allah for Allah.'" – *Daily Post*, September 25; *UPI*, September 25

September 26, 2013 (SYRIA): Kurdish militiamen killed the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's local commander in Aleppo. – *AP*, September 26

September 27, 2013 (PAKISTAN): A bomb tore through a bus carrying junior government officials in Peshawar, killing at least 18 people. – *CBS*, September 27

September 27, 2013 (MALI): Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) named a replacement for Abdelhamid Abu Zeid, who was killed in fighting with French-led forces. Said Abou Moughatil, an Algerian, will now command AQIM's Tarik ibn Ziyad battalion in northern Mali. – *AFP*, September 27

September 28, 2013 (MALI): A suicide bomber in a vehicle killed at least two people near a military camp in Timbuktu. Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb claimed responsibility. – *Voice of America*, September 30

September 29, 2013 (IRAQ): A suicide bomber killed at least 40 people at a Shi'a Muslim funeral in Mussayab, 40 miles south of Baghdad. – *Reuters*, September 29

September 29, 2013 (IRAQ): Militants launched a coordinated suicide and car bomb attack at the entrance to a Kurdish security service headquarters in Erbil, killing six people. It was the first major assault in the Kurdistan region since 2007. – *AFP*, September 29; *Reuters*, September 29

September 29, 2013 (PAKISTAN): A car bomb killed 33 people on a crowded street in Peshawar's oldest bazaar. – *AP*, September 28; *AP*, September 30

September 29, 2013 (NIGERIA): Boko Haram group gunmen attacked a college dormitory and fired on students as they slept, killing 40 people. – *AFP*, September 30

September 30, 2013 (UNITED STATES): A U.S. court sentenced Sabirhan Hasanoff to 18 years in prison for aiding al-Qa`ida. Hasanoff, an accountant living in New York, scopped out the New York Stock Exchange as a potential target for al-Qa`ida in 2008. – *Reuters*, September 30

September 30, 2013 (IRAQ): Approximately 14 car bombs rocked predominately Shi'a areas of Baghdad, killing at least 54 people. – *Reuters*, September 30

September 30, 2013 (YEMEN): Suspected al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula militants seized a military base in Hadramawt Province. The fighters were dressed in fatigues and riding in military trucks. The fighters reportedly held hostage a number of high-ranking officers and soldiers inside the base. – *AP*, September 30; *AP*, September 30